NF

ISSUE #72: A TRIBUTE TO TORIYAMA

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

SAND LAND

DRAGON BALL: SPARKING! ZERO

STEAMWORLD HEIST II

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

AN INTERVIEW WITH **DAVID LIU**

ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

ENDLESS OCEAN: LUMINOUS

ANIMAL WELL

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SPLINTERED FATE

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES ARCADE: WRATH OF THE MUTANTS

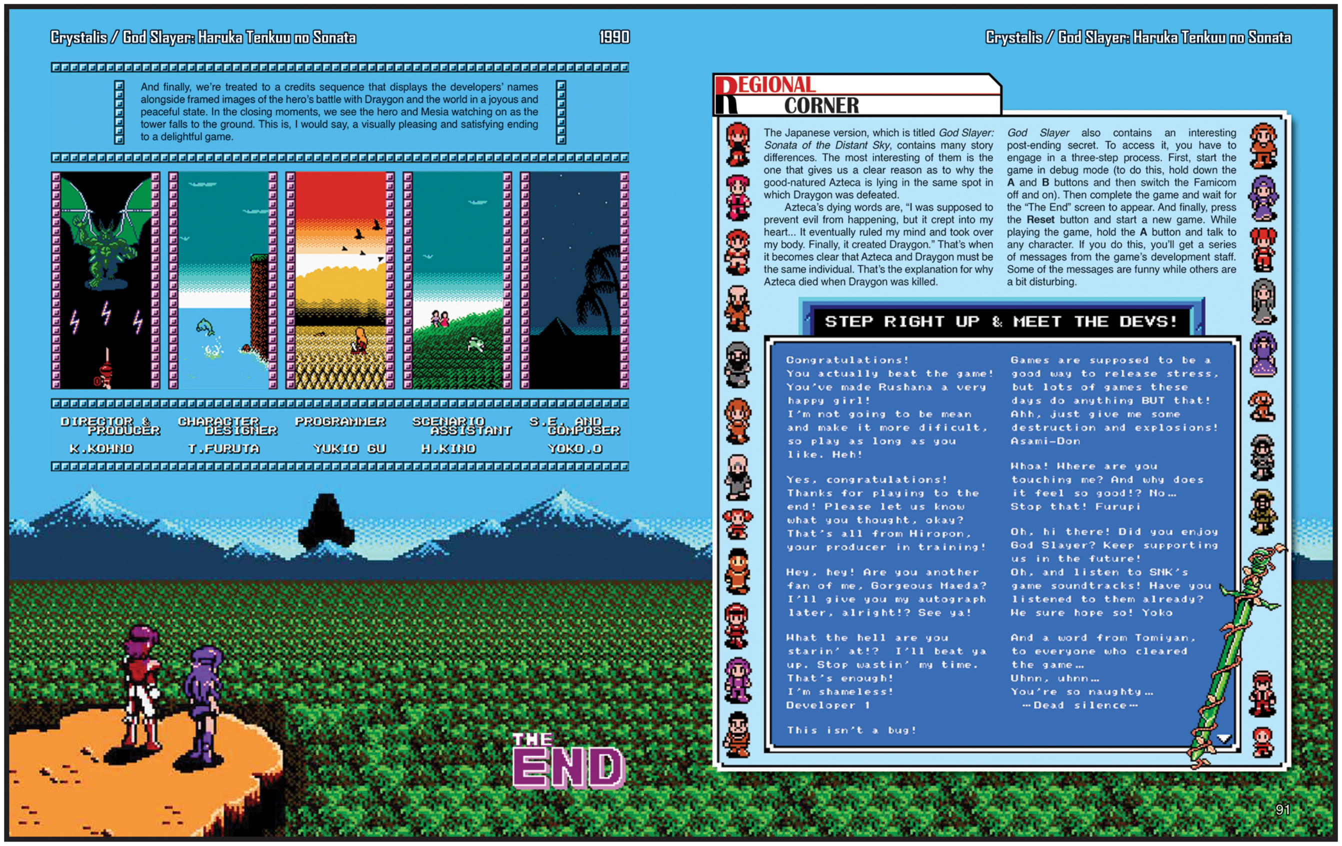
LITTLE KITTY, BIG CITY

JULY/ AUGUST 2024

PUBLISHING PARTNERSHIP

A SECOND NF BOOK is on its way soon! With work wrapping up on The Impact of Iwata (its long-awaited audiobook version is just about finished!), we've been looking forward to what's next for the new NF Books publishing expansion. And it looks like we've pinned down our second project: Rey Esteban's NES Endings Compendium: Volume 2, covering all of the NES games released throughout 1990.

If you go back just a few issues to NF #68, you can read my review of Rey's Volume 1 in the Community section there. I thought it was fantastic, and gave it a 9.5 score! So I was thrilled when he reached out to me and asked if NF would be willing to take over publishing duties for the series going forward. (Limited Run was his publishing partner for Volume 1.) We're working on pulling the project together now, and we'll be taking the same approach we did to raise funds to print The Impact of Iwata: running a Kickstarter! We'll have more info to share about that soon, but in the meanwhile he's a preview of a pair of pages, showing off a classic horizon-gazing ending from Crystalis. **— LUCAS**


Crystalis / God Slayer: Haruka Tenkuu no Sonata 1990

And finally, we're treated to a credits sequence that displays the developers' names alongside framed images of the hero's battle with Draygon and the world in a joyous and peaceful state. In the closing moments, we see the hero and Mesia watching on as the tower falls to the ground. This is, I would say, a visually pleasing and satisfying ending to a delightful game.

Crystalis / God Slayer: Haruka Tenkuu no Sonata

REGIONAL CORNER

The Japanese version, which is titled *God Slayer: Sonata of the Distant Sky*, contains many story differences. The most interesting of them is the one that gives us a clear reason as to why the good-natured Azteca is lying in the same spot in which Draygon was defeated.

Azteca's dying words are, "I was supposed to prevent evil from happening, but it crept into my heart... It eventually ruled my mind and took over my body. Finally, it created Draygon." That's when it becomes clear that Azteca and Draygon must be the same individual. That's the explanation for why Azteca died when Draygon was killed.

God Slayer also contains an interesting post-ending secret. To access it, you have to engage in a three-step process. First, start the game in debug mode (to do this, hold down the **A** and **B** buttons and then switch the Famicom off and on). Then complete the game and wait for the "The End" screen to appear. And finally, press the **Reset** button and start a new game. While playing the game, hold the **A** button and talk to any character. If you do this, you'll get a series of messages from the game's development staff. Some of the messages are funny while others are a bit disturbing.

STEP RIGHT UP & MEET THE DEVS!

Congratulations!
You actually beat the game!
You've made Rushana a very happy girl!
I'm not going to be mean and make it more dificult, so play as long as you like. Heh!

Yes, congratulations!
Thanks for playing to the end! Please let us know what you thought, okay?
That's all from Hiropon, your producer in training!

Hey, hey! Are you another fan of me, Gorgeous Maeda?
I'll give you my autograph later, alright!? See ya!

What the hell are you starin' at!? I'll beat ya up. Stop wastin' my time.
That's enough!
I'm shameless!
Developer 1

This isn't a bug!

Games are supposed to be a good way to release stress, but lots of games these days do anything BUT that!
Ahh, just give me some destruction and explosions!
Asami-Don

Whoa! Where are you touching me? And why does it feel so good!? No...
Stop that! Furupi

Oh, hi there! Did you enjoy God Slayer? Keep supporting us in the future!
Oh, and listen to SNK's game soundtracks! Have you listened to them already?
We sure hope so! Yoko

And a word from Tomiyan, to everyone who cleared the game...
Uhnn, uhnn...
You're so naughty...
...Dead silence...

91

Stay tuned for the launch of the Kickstarter campaign!

CONTENTS

INBOX
4

NEWS
8

DOWNLOAD
14

COMICS
7, 27, 39, 58 & 81

FEATURES
28

PREVIEWS
40

RETRO
51

INTERVIEW
55

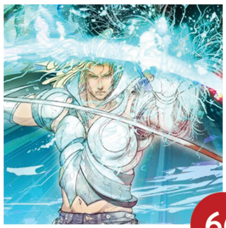
REVIEWS
59

COMMUNITY
78

NEXT ISSUE
82

JULY/
AUGUST 2024

72


66

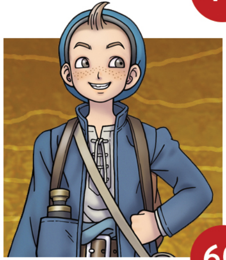
16

48

40

28

42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50

14

64

47

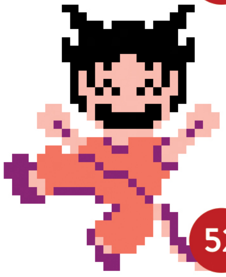
74

55

70

20

44


52

ON THE COVER

Most of the time our cover position is given to a single new game that's set to go on sale at some point in the near future. For this issue dedicated to the memory of the late Akira Toriyama, though, one game alone just wouldn't cut it: His contributions to the video game industry were far too wide for that! So we've instead assembled this collage, with his most famous character, Goku, leading the charge, and several other classic characters and series he helped bring to life placed all around Dragon Ball's hero.

INBOX

THE DRAGON OF CREATIVITY

My little brother's always been a better artist than me.

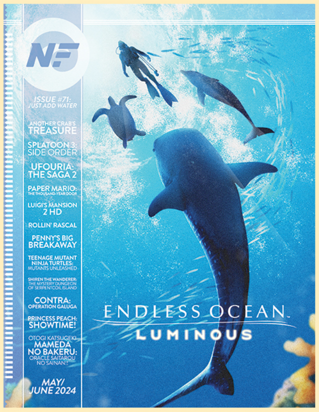
I can knock out a knock-off of Mario easily enough, just off the top of my head, but that's about the extent of my artistic talents. Dan, on the other hand, can craft original characters out of thin air, with no trouble at all. Give him a piece of paper, a pencil and a general idea of what kind of character he's aiming for, and he'll sketch it out in seconds flat. It's impressive!

And I think a lot of Dan's creativity can be traced back to Akira Toriyama. The first piece I remember really being taken aback by, by Dan, was back when he was still in high school and he got the assignment to draw one of the gods of Greek mythology. Dan turned in this huge, colorful portrait of Hades, and he'd drawn him as a villain straight out of Dragon Ball Z: matching Toriyama's style to a T, and even wrapping him in flames in the same way a fiery aura enveloped Goku when he powered up. (And to really sell the "god of the dead" part, Dan also added a symbol on a clasp of his cloak: the Black Mana skull from Magic: The Gathering.)

That kind of copying is so crucial for artists who are just setting out on their journeys to find their own style. Students naturally look to masters of the craft they're pursuing as mentors, studying their techniques and emulating their methods until they reach such a point of confidence that they're able to branch off and find their own path to originality. And I think for Dan and for an entire generation around him, Akira Toriyama served as that role model. Drawing their own Gokus or Cronos or Dragon Quest Slimes was surely the first step so many kids took on their own quests of creativity.

So, in this issue of NF Magazine, we honor that impact! We've put together a central feature that traces Akira Toriyama's career – focusing on his contributions to the video game industry specifically, since we are a gaming magazine after all. We've also got previews of Toriyama titles that might be Nintendo-bound soon, a lead review of the final Switch game that saw release while he was still with us, and much more. I hope it all inspires you – artistically!

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



ISSUE #71:
MAY/JUNE 2024

We splashed around with waterlogged games in our last issue, inspired by the back-to-back releases of Another Crab's Treasure and Endless Ocean: Luminous. We've got reviews of both of those titles ready for reading in this issue! (One of them turned out to be a lot better than the other.)

As always, our Player's Poll offered advance insight into the theme of our next issue through the questions it asked, which were all about the great Akira Toriyama! We first wanted to know which piece of media was your first exposure to his art. Second, we asked for you to tell us which of his many different characters is your all-time favorite Toriyama design: a hero, a villain, a monster, whatever! Lastly, we asked for your opinion on which of his contributions to the video game industry you felt was his greatest. Here's what many of you had to say:

LETTERS

1. I was first exposed to Akira Toriyama's work through Dragon Ball Z, when it was still on its initial run on Toonami.

2. This is a really tough question! Maybe Goku, but specifically when he was a kid. But not his later appearances, because he lost his fluff (kind of like how Pikachu became skinnier).

3. His work on Dragon Quest. They're great games, but the 3D games are especially appealing because you can see his art style shine in every scene. Dragon Quest XI captures his aesthetic so well! **– JULIO CABRERA**

1. My first exposure to his art style was Dragon Warrior, although I didn't realize it at the time. I first understood who he was while watching DBZ on Toonami.

2. While Vegeta is my favorite DBZ character, and one of my favorite characters of all time, I think Trunks is my favorite character design. Due to his time-traveling storyline we get to see Trunks as both a child and young adult, which I have always found interesting.

3. It has to be Dragon Quest. The way that he was able to take the concepts of D&D monsters and completely change the visual style to make them more approachable, and even marketable, is incredible. **– F5 GAMES**

Dragon Ball Z, as I channel-surfed to the sci-fi station when they showed anime, and the very first thing I ever saw was the Namekian village elder denying Vegeta a Dragon Ball – so Vegeta blasted him and the village. "I'm probably too young for this!" *(Flipped away) . . . (flipped back)* **– PHOKAL**

Hello! Let me just say, this magazine is a nostalgic thrill. Every issue starts the same for me as they did with Nintendo Power: read the questions and comments, search out all the comics, then finally page through it one tasty page at a time. So, thanks for that.

Poll questions!

1. The first that I KNEW of, when watching it, was Dragon Ball Z. Anime was tough to come by back then and I was hooked. But imagine my surprise when watching the familiar sight of my Mom playing her fave franchise, Dragon Quest, and I stupidly said, "Hey, they look like they could be DBZ characters." That's when my younger brother told me the truth. I was enjoying this man's work long before I knew it!

2. Chrono Trigger's misunderstood baddie, Magus. I'm not even going to sugarcoat it: Magus started me on a trend of rooting for the ultra mysterious villians in almost every game I play and I'm always hoping they become a playable character. I even tried to carve this guy out of soap in a very short, misguided phase of sculpturing that I'm sure EVERYONE goes through, am I right? Moving on!

3. Obviously, Chrono Trigger. The art, the story, the music, just the overall epicness of this game. I get it for every system every time because it's one of many games that I'm willing to sit down and relive. My favorite parts being the beginning setup for the trial, the trial, Cyrus' whole story line and, of course, Magus. Thanks for the opportunity to swoon over one of my favorite games! **– MELISSA MULLIGAN**

THE FIRST ONE OUT OF THE GATE!

Question 1: I cannot speak enough praise for Toonami! Even today, with Toonami as scaled back as WBD has made it. The original Toonami programming from 20+ years ago was where I first saw Toriyama's work in Dragon Ball. Of course I had no idea what I was watching, but it was still visually stunning.

Question 2: Jade from Dragon Quest XI is probably my favorite Toriyama character design. I love her long hair and sharp bangs. Bonus points for her name being the color of her outfit too. (I'd be remiss to not shout out the Slime monster too.)

Question 3: Call me silly, but I think Toriyama's greatest contribution to video games didn't even come from the man himself. I was unaware of just how many people he inspired until after his death, but I was really taken aback after learning that Sonic the Hedgehog was aping Dragon Ball at least a half dozen times. Everything from specific frames to entire concepts like "going super" or the Chaos Emeralds. **— CODY FICKER**

We've had some trouble with our normal email account that receives submissions for the Inbox, so we had to ask our Patreon patrons to send in responses to the Player's Poll questions kind of at the last minute. Cody's reply was the first one that came in, so your three answers have earned this top-of-the-page position of prominence. Thanks for being so quick on the draw, Cody!

Question 1: Although I was familiar with Dragon Ball when I was young, Chrono Trigger was my first real encounter with Toriyama's work.

Question 2: Vegeta is no doubt my favorite character design. It's striking and menacing without being over the top.

Question 3: To me his greatest contribution to gaming was Dragon Quest. His artwork and designs helped pioneer Japanese RPGs for years to come.
— DAVID O'BRIEN

Q1: My first introduction to his art was DBZ on Toonami. Every weekend as soon as M*A*S*H ended, we'd kick my Mom off the TV and nab it so we could watch DBZ! My Dad was obsessed with the Cell Saga.

Q2: Slime. Slime! Sliiiiiiiiiiime! The basic blue one is absolutely my favorite. Hehehe. They are just so cute and squishy!

Q3: #1 huh? That's a toughy . . . his style with the Dragon Quest games, DBZ games, Blue Dragon and *[insert others I'm not aware of]* were all amazing in their own ways, but I must say his greatest contribution personally is the Dragon Quest series! Not only does my fav Slime appear in the series, but it's always drenched in Akira Toriyama's art style in the best way. Super cute! I haven't played many games in his art style, but I can say for certain that every one I have has filled me with wonder, nostalgia and joy. Mr. Toriyama will be and is quite missed by this gamer. **— GWEN SHEPHERD**

I've never played one of his games, but as a collector of Nintendo Power Player's Guides, the Chrono Trigger guide was a grail. They cost quite a bit online, especially in good condition. I mainly wanted it to read the game's story and look at all the awesome artwork. I finally got one at a decent price! . . . Unfortunately, the seller didn't mention he had spilled Dr. Pepper on it and doused it in Axe body spray. Regardless, it was a triumph finally holding a copy. **— JOSH JONES**

My first exposure to the work of Akira Toriyama was through the DS remakes of Dragon Quest games, but I never really got into them that much. Years later, I got more into anime and loved watching Dragon Ball Z Kai, and that got me really interested in his work – I've enjoyed the projects he worked on in the years since that time.

My favorite character design of Akira Toriyama (going with my love of Kai) is probably Goku. I think he's just a solidly drawn character, has a great personality and is really liked by everyone. A close second would be Crono from Chrono Trigger. Even though he's a silent protagonist, he's still just super cool.

I'd say Akira Toriyama's greatest contribution to the world of video games is most likely the Dragon Quest series. The reason why I'd say it's my #1 choice is because, for one, it's a series that is and has been going strong for nearly 40 years now (and it is especially popular in Japan). Not only that, it's influenced the entire RPG genre as a whole (not just turn-based RPGs). We wouldn't have Chrono Trigger (one of my personal favorite RPGs) without Dragon Quest. **— MATTHEW**

1 - Dragon Quest, or Dragon Warrior as it was known at the time.

2 - I really love Toriyama's work with vehicles and machines, so Robo is my favorite of his designs. There are so many neat little details that he worked into it.

3 - His lasting legacy is colossal, so it's hard to say any one specific thing, but I hope his greatest contribution is the sense of joy and life his work had. It was so immediately welcoming to encounter his work, whether it was a happy little Slime – still the greatest of all low-level enemies – or the feisty Chrono Trigger gang. **— JARATHEN**

Thank you so much to everyone who sent in responses, especially directly through Patreon!

CARTER'S CORNER

Hello again! The quiz was a little different this time. To beat Ganondorf, I first acquired a 5-shot Savage Lynel Bow (32 damage × 5), beat tons of Silver Lynels for their horns (fuse power 55), suited Link up in full Attack Up armor (+50%) and finally ate Level 3 Attack Up food (+50%). I used a Rocket Shield to get airborne for slow-motion bow shots, and Ganondorf was gone in under a minute! (Literally!)

Now, about the Starters in Pokémon Legends: Z-A: I think they'll be Snivy, Litten and Totodile, because their final forms are cool and each look kind of futuristic.

I'm still playing Super Mario Maker 2 (though I need to 100% Wonder and 3D World sometime). I've uploaded eight levels based on the Special World in Super Mario Bros. Wonder – the Course ID of the most popular one, Climb to the Beat, is Q19-27R-NQF. Also, only the first of those levels has a skip to the end! They're all pretty tricky! Other recent courses I've made are ON/OFF Gauntlet, Four-Player Fun, Automatic Goomba Snow Park, Impossible Maze 2 and Happy Father's Day.

Quiz time! Which Pokémon should get new Mega Evolutions in Z-A? (Besides Starters and Legendaries?) My thoughts next time!

REMEMBERING UNCLE JOHNNY

The entire Nintendo Force team would like to thank our Interview section star for this issue, David Liu, for his efforts to respond to our emails and answer the interview questions even while in the midst of a family tragedy. David's uncle Johnny was battling severe health challenges as this issue was being assembled, and he ultimately passed away on June 8. Johnny's daughter Christine, who streams on Twitch under the name Pikaaaliu, shared the photo above and also reflected on her father's influence on her love of gaming.

"My Dad is the reason I was introduced to video games. Got me started on the TurboGrafx playing Bonk. Using cheat codes to be 'invisible' in Fighting Force. Taking me to the Katy Mills Mall to for the Pokémon 2000 launch so I could get a Mew. He spoiled the hell out of me as a kid. All he wanted to do was to share his love of games with me. Fast-forward to adulthood and we were gushing over Streets of Rage 4. I told him about TXS & CB. And how we started hosting locals. He got me the PS5 that we bring as setup – because he was so hyped about the deal he got. He would show me all the arcade cabs he modded. He even started a YouTube channel. He truly showed me that I could always be a kid and to never let that side of me go. Yesterday we had to let him go. It was his time. It really sucks that I couldn't take him to a major or to Nintendo World like we would geek out about. I miss him so much already and that's never going to stop. I love you, Dad. May you rest in peace."

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Melissa Mulligan**, the winner of our most recent Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions about games starring leading ladies!

QUESTION #1

We first used "Leading Ladies" as an issue theme 10 years ago – what's been the best game since 2014 that has featured a female protagonist?

QUESTION #2

Nintendo's just revealed a new Legend of Zelda in which you actually play as Zelda! Are you as hyped as we are to be the Princess?

QUESTION #3

Who is a female character who has never had her own game before, but should? What would the game be called, and what would it play like?

Send your responses to **NintendoForceLucas@gmail.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #73" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win their choice of any game that features a female lead character!

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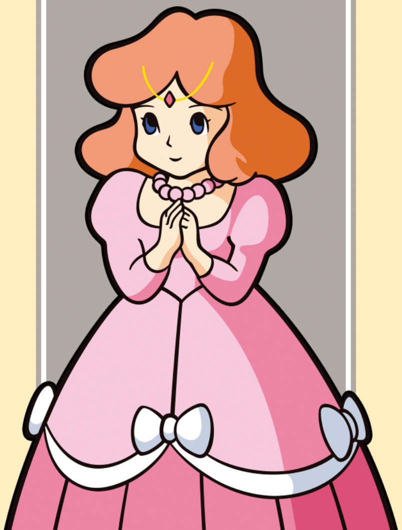

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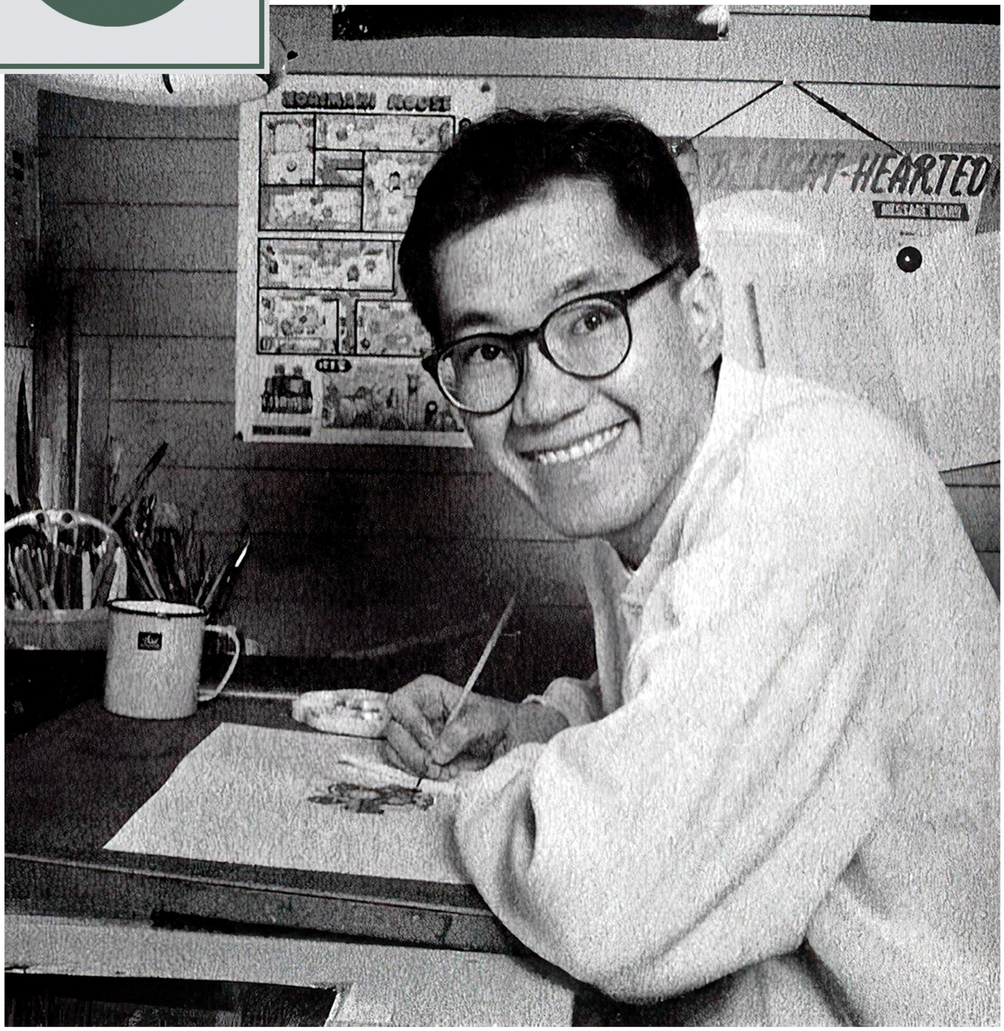


Akira Toriyama: 1955 – 2024

The legendary manga artist passed away unexpectedly on March 1.

AKIRA TORIYAMA, the creator of Dragon Ball and whose hands also brought life to Chrono Trigger, Dragon Quest and countless other projects, passed away on March 1. He was 68.

Born on April 5, 1955, in Japan's Aichi prefecture, Toriyama's work spanned manga, anime, video games and everything in between.

Dragon Ball, which debuted in 1984, is one of the best-selling manga series and has touched millions of fans through its comics, anime, games and films. Toriyama also lent his artistic talents to many video games, creating characters for Chrono Trigger, Dragon Quest, Blue Dragon and others.

Most recently, Toriyama worked on Sand Land, Bandai Namco's 2024 video game adaptation of his manga series of the same name. It released on April 26. He had other projects in the works before his passing, according to a statement from his studio.

"It's our deep regret that he still had several works in the middle of creation with great enthusiasm," the statement read. "Also, he would have many more things to achieve."

Toriyama's death inspired tributes worldwide, from fellow manga, anime and video game creators to artists, movie stars, athletes, musicians and political figures.

" . . . He taught us that we all have a Goku in us and a Frieza to overcome," said former NFL star Robert Griffin III. "We all need a Krillin to have our back, and a Vegeta to challenge us . . . "

"Without you, many of us have little," said Eric Vale, voice actor of Trunks in Dragon Ball Z. "But because of you, we all have joy. Safe passage and thank you."

I'm forever grateful for Toriyama's legacy. I first experienced Japanese media while watching Dragon Ball as a kid. It changed my life, and that sentiment is felt across the globe, according to his studio.

"Thanks to the support of so many people around the world, he has been able to continue his creative activities for over 45 years. We hope that Akira Toriyama's unique world of creation continues to be loved by everyone for a long time to come." **— MAGGIE**

> If the only thing he ever did was create the artwork for Chrono Trigger, he'd still be an absolute legend in my book. After years of trying to get into RPGs, that's the game that finally made it click, and opened my eyes to countless other experiences and lasting friendships. Add the profound influence and fantastic memories the Dragon Ball series has given me over the years, and "legend" seems like too small a word. This loss hit hard. – **KRIS**

> I count myself fortunate to have been able to spend a few years in Japan and witness firsthand just how deeply Dragon Ball was revered in Toriyama's homeland. Artwork of children's favorite characters plastered their elementary classrooms' walls. And when I went to see Dragon Ball Super: Broly on opening night, the audience was filled with college students and young working adults. The impact on every generation was unlike anything I'd seen anywhere else in the world. – **TONY**

> More than anything, Akira Toriyama was a master at creating art and stories that bridged the gaps between children and adults. Growing up, he was the first artist for games and manga that I learned by name, his signature style being too distinct to ever be lost in the crowd. Like with the passing of Stan Lee and Jim Henson, the sudden loss of Toriyama-san took a part of my childhood along with it, though his legacy will last forever. – **JONATHAN**

Honestly, I'm still filled with a sense of disbelief at this all-too-sudden news of Toriyama-san's passing.

Toriyama-san was an acquaintance of mine from when I was a writer for Shōnen Jump, and at the behest of his editor, Torishima-san, I decided to ask him to do the art for Dragon Quest when I started work on that game.

More than 37 years later, he's drawn so many charming designs for characters and monsters that I can hardly count them all.

The history of Dragon Quest has been linked to Toriyama-san's character designs.

Toriyama-san, along with the late Sugiyama-sensei, was a longtime partner in making Dragon Quest.

To think that he would die . . .

As for what else I could say, I can't put anything more into words than this. It's truly heartbreaking. – **YUJI HORII**

This is the biggest shock of the year! I'm praying for Toriyama-san's soul.

The animations for Dragon Quest's "Hero" in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate were designed to be closer to Toriyama-san's style of action. The impact ended up being less than expected because "Eleven" was a little smarter *[not a flashy fighter like Goku]* but the impact was still big.

Thank you very much.

On a personal note, I'm still feeling unsettled . . . – **MASAHIRO SAKURAI**

Losing someone who has created something, especially someone who has done something that only they could do, is a loss that is hard to put into words . . . – **HIDEKI KAMIYA**

My heart just sank.

Thank you for all the characters and adventures, the make-believe special moves and power-ups at recess, the stickers, posters, trading cards and figurines. The video games. The wonder and speculation before and after each episode. The laughs from the binged manga. The inspiration in every drawing, and the topic that started so many conversations and friendships.

Your work meant that and so much more to millions of people of all ages. It's timeless, iconic and influential, and it opened so many doors and hearts to anime around the planet. I believe it will live on for generations to come, as will you in so many of our hearts.

Thank you for my childhood!

RIP Legend. – **TEE LOPES**

My strength fails me, and I can't find the will to do anything. This isn't the kind of thing I want to be commenting on, you know? But I will write something. Once I get started, I've got a million things to say, so it might get extremely long, but I'll try and summarize it as compactly as possible. Still, I haven't processed my feelings, so please forgive my rambling.

Even looking back, it's no exaggeration — when I visited him at home, or had him come stay over at my place, or when we went out together for fun, I have nothing but good memories, and every time we talked on the phone, I got tired from all the laughter. He was so much fun. So dirty-minded, so adorable, so sharp-tongued and so humble.

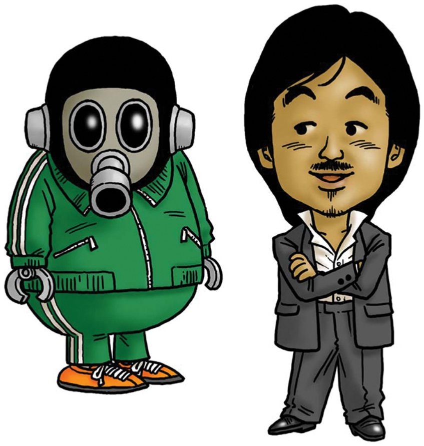
In my principal occupation of drawing comics, we did some work together, and that was fun, too. But we spent 99% of our relationship not even talking about comics. As a cartoonist, the things we were looking at, and our levels as authors, were so different that I never paid attention to his greatness. I did know about it, of course. But when I came into contact with him, I never felt that in the slightest. It's his personality. That's why, even now, I can only think of him as a friend, rather than as a great cartoonist.

Last summer, before I had surgery, he got word of it from somewhere, and sent me an email. It was *reeeeeally* rare to get an email from him, and the contents were all regarding my health — he seemed to be worried about me. We had known each other for over 40 years, but I think it was the first time Toriyama-san had ever treated me that kindly. I thought hell had frozen over. Normally, there wouldn't have been anything but jokes or dumb stories. What's up with that? This isn't any time to be worrying about somebody else. Geeze. I think it was a little bit before that, but when I called him feeling all kinds of ill, I told him, "I'll probably die first, so make sure you hold a memorial for me, MC'd by you, Toriyama-san! Also, it'll really burnish my legacy if you give a speech, so do that, too!" He promised me, and yet I couldn't hold him to it.

Why, oh why didn't I just call him after he sent me that email? I seriously regret it. The thought of not being able to share any more dumb stories on long phone calls with him is just too terrible to fathom. I have so many things saved up that I want to tell him. All sorts of things to say. If only I could talk to him, one more time, just like always — even if he was only half listening.

It's not fair to let that casual "OK" you sent, in response to my reply saying to contact me later, be the last thing I ever hear from you. I ache from the bottom of my heart. – **MASAKAZU KATSURA**

I believe that Toriyama-san taught me what it means to be a professional and what work is. I had the utmost respect for him. I pray for his soul to rest in peace. – **HIRONOBU SAKAGUCHI**



At Long Last: The LEGO of Zelda!

A decades-long dream has finally become reality: LEGO is now making sets based on The Legend of Zelda!

FAN DESIGNS HAVE been steadily filling the LEGO Ideas website for years. Every once in a while, the House of Bricks will dip into that pool of fan desires to pluck out a new IP and harness its popularity for sweet, sweet cash. And so we've arrived at another of those brand-new brand moments: The first set for The Legend of Zelda will be the Great Deku Tree!

Just like the games, this set encompasses eons by having both an Ocarina of Time and a Breath of the Wild version of the Tree in one box – though you'll have to choose just one of the two to build, since the same pieces are shared by both instruction sets.

The first option is the original OoT Deku Tree. Both Adult and Young Link minifigures are included, and it even has a Great Deku Sprout character and a couple of Deku Babas too. Then, inside the tree, Link will encounter a Big Skulltula! Young Link's treehouse in the Kokiri Forest is also buildable with these pieces.

The Breath of the Wild version of the Tree features Champion Link with the Master Sword and Hylian Shield and Zelda with the Sheikah Slate. Hestu also makes an appearance (though I have yet to spy any Korok Seeds or his infamous "Gift"). A pair of Koroks and a fairy round out the minifigures. Various mushrooms, flowers and other greenery also litter the the area, and the Deku Tree itself sports lovely pink and peach leaves. Inside the tree is a Korok shop full of potions and apples.

The set releases on September 1 and is priced at $300. That's $150 per Tree! (Though it would jump to $600 if you want to display both at the same time!)

BY BRETT MARTIN

NEW NON-LEGO ZELDA MERCH

Even more options for celebrating your lasting love of the Legend!

FANS HAVE BEEN clamoring for years for a solid replica of the Master Sword, but have had to settle for cheap one-size-fits-all costume props or unofficial customs. While this Master Sword from Proplica is also plastic, it has a plethora of features to give it a high-end feel (and they have to justify the $200 price tag somehow). The "metal" look of the 41-inch sword is achieved through metallic and pearlescent paints, and the Blade of Evil's Bane also comes with sound effects and songs from the Zelda series activated by some buttons on the hilt. Preorders have largely sold out.

If you're looking for more Tears of the Kingdom merch, a quick trip to – or a long import from – the Nintendo Tokyo store will have you swimming in new goods. The Zonai Wing rug is probably where your eye went first, followed by the bomb bag or shirt. A Purah hair tie, Zelda earrings, a Korok bag and a Korok backpack pouch are the other fashion accessories. Next up we have a bunch of geoglyph stickers and Secret Stone pins in various colors, representing the items you find when you explore those geoglyphs. (Unfortunately, the pins are blind-boxed.) Of all these options, though, the metal Bokoblin Chest keychain and Addison's Sign keychain are the two items I picked up immediately!

BUS OF PLUSH

With two of the Runaway Five inside!

HOBONICHI'S MOTHER PROJECT just keeps surprising us with plush releases! This time it's the Runaway Five's Lucky and Gorgeous! The Blues . . . I mean, *Tonzura* Brothers both hold microphones and are ready to put on a show. Their box even replicates the famous bus they make their great escapes in! The set costs 6,600 yen (about $47) and the Hobonichi website can now ship to the States. Shipping was $32, meaning the bus ticket to me in Colorado was $80 for the pair. Better than a debt-clearing Diamond!

HUGGABLE MOSS

Pikmin 4 gets a second plushy puppy.

EVEN BEFORE OATCHI, Moss is actually the first pup you meet in Pikmin 4: She's introduced in the prologue as a partner to Captain Olimar. She's also playable later on in Olimar's Shipwreck Tale, and later still she's a bit of a nuisance to your character and Oatchi in the main game – but she's just protecting Olimar, who has become a leafling. (That's a not-so-spoilery spoiler.) Both Oatchi and Moss already have fake plushes of their own, but they look terrible and should be easily avoidable. This new official San-ei plush will be released in late June for around $15 and is six inches tall. Oatchi is also still available. Just avoid eBay when shopping for Nintendo plushes!

ISABELLE IS A STATUE

First 4 Figures immortalizes another Nintendo icon.

ANIMAL CROSSING'S BUBBLY assistant is getting her own First 4 Figures PVC figure statue that will kick off a new line of figure statues inspired by Animal Crossing: New Horizons. (Isabelle was seen in the teaser alongside shadowy silhouettes of Tom Nook and K.K. Slider.) Isabelle will arrive in Q4 of 2024 and the Exclusive Edition, only available at the F4F website, is around $105. A sensor on the base will play three music or voice tracks straight from the game. She's seen in her summer attire with her coral Nook, Inc. uniform, and the backdrop is magnetically attached. Perhaps they'll be interchangeable with the others' backdrops?

Port Authority

Nintendo has acquired port house Shiver Entertainment.

PRESIDENT FURUKAWA HAS opened his wallet once more.

Historically, Nintendo acquisitions have been uncommon events. The Big N has partnered with plenty of other studios over the years to bring new games to their systems, but it's been extremely rare for Nintendo to then purchase those partners and bring them in as wholly owned subsidiaries.

Nintendo's reluctance to buy up smaller studios has seemed especially striking in recent years, since competitors like Microsoft have adopted the opposite approach: constantly dipping into their war chests and snapping up more and more talented teams year after year. But things might finally be starting to shift in this area – Nintendo seems to be in the midst of a switch in priorities.

A slow switch, granted. But let's run back the tape to take a second look here.

In 2021, Nintendo announced that they'd acquired Next Level Games. It made sense: That team has partnered with the Big N for decades, and has been trusted to develop sequels in big series like Punch-Out!!, Mario Strikers and, biggest of all, Luigi's Mansion. Finally bringing them in fully was a no-brainer.

Then, in 2022, another acquisition: Nintendo fully purchased Dynamo Pictures, then renamed them to become Nintendo Pictures. Again, that move made sense: The company is pushing more into non-interactive representations of their brands (especially in the wake of the insane success of The Super Mario Bros. Movie), and having their own wholly owned movie studio perfectly aligns with that aim.

So the momentum's been building a bit. And now? Another domino has fallen.

Nintendo has just announced the acquisition of Shiver Entertainment, a Miami-based studio known particularly for their work in porting big-name third-party games to the Switch. They brought titles like Hogwarts Legacy and Mortal Kombat 1 to the platform in recent years, and Nintendo's press release praises them as an "experienced and accomplished development team."

. . . Though there's been some pushback on that from fans. Shiver has gotten those games to run on Switch, true, but they've been plagued by technical issues and reception has been so poor that we haven't even bothered to review them in NF. So this acquisition only makes sense if Nintendo is seeing some untapped potential from this team. Maybe bringing them in as a subsidiary and giving them full support with first-party development resources will level them up, and they'll become a real asset heading into the next console cycle! Even if not, the purchase reinforces their new approach: Nintendo's not so scared of acquisitions anymore. **– LUCAS**

San Frantendo

Nintendo New York won't be alone for much longer!

WHILE NINTENDO OF AMERICA may operate out of Redmond, Washington, historians will recall that the North American branch was originally based in Manhattan, New York. It's therefore fitting that the company's flagship retailer would be nestled in the famous Rockefeller Center! Certainly a must-see attraction for the game-obsessed tourist, though an inconvenient destination for the millions of fans who can't reasonably make the weekend pilgrimage.

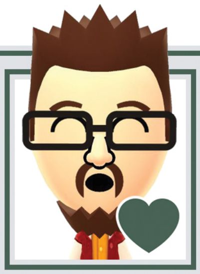
Now, following the addition of three stores in the even more inaccessible Japan, Nintendo is set to open a second U.S. location in 2025. The lucky city? San Francisco, California! And wouldn't you know it, I coincidentally happened to move to the Bay Area a year ago! Tough luck once again to my Midwestern brethren, but in my case, everything's coming up Milhouse!

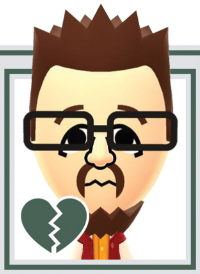
This news is tempered slightly by Nintendo's choice of venue: the historic Union Square shopping district. Businesses in the area were already facing heat due to online competition and other factors in the years prior to the spread of COVID-19, only for the pandemic to hasten closures at an alarming pace. The area never properly recovered after the shutdown, as evidenced by a vacancy rate of 20.6% in the first quarter of 2024 (according to a report from the real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield). Anyway you slice it, Nintendo is facing an uphill climb.

Then again, Nintendo San Francisco could turn out to be a key driver of tourism and consumer spending, doing its part to dig Union Square out of its funk. And why wouldn't it? I still reminisce fondly about my first visit to the New York store back in 2017 – the combo of Nintendo history museum and repository of merch you can't find anywhere else is just too tempting to pass on! I just pray the store is open by the time the Switch's successor launches, because you can bet I'll be there personally to soak in every glorious moment! **– TONY**

Great!

Finally, a second official Nintendo store in the U.S.!





Oh.

. . . It's still nowhere near where I live. (Lucky Tony!)

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

SUMMER'S IN FULL swing now, and the release slate for the Switch is a little fuller than I thought it'd be here in the system's last full year in the spotlight. Getting things going in the month of July will be the latest installment in the ongoing Trails saga, Trails through Daybreak. It's set for July 5, and it's going to be introducing an optional new style of active combat to sit alongside the returning turn-based battles. Read more on Page 44!

NINTENDO SOMETIMES BLESSES us with true brilliance in the midst of the summer months, but what they've got on deck for July 18 doesn't look so hot to me. Nintendo World Championships: NES Edition seems to be just another nostalgia grab mining memories of the 8-bit '80s – but take a look for yourself on Page 48 to form your own opinion!

OUR PREVIEWS SECTION in this issue includes a couple of Akira Toriyama-assisted games that aren't yet confirmed to be coming to Nintendo systems: Sand Land and Dragon Ball: Sparking! Zero. We've written about them regardless, because of Toriyama-san's involvement, but also because this game also from Bandai Namco points to the strong possibility that they'll show up on Switch (or Switch 2) eventually. See Page 45.

I WENT A little out of order there: One Piece Odyssey is set for July 26, but four days before that, this game will go on sale in the eShop. (Though is it really "on sale" if it's a free-to-play game?) Some microtranscations will surely offer you the opportunity of sending the devs of The New Denpa Men some money, of course. See Page 15 for more!

ROUNDING OUT THE month of July is a third new Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles title on Switch for 2024! We've got a review of Wrath of the Mutants ready on Page 64 this time, and the new Mutant Mayhem is also still on track for later this year. But Splintered Fate is different than both of them! It's a Hades-like simultaneous four-player adventure that I think looks incredibly promising. Take a look for yourself on Page 47!

LASTLY, LOOKING A little further ahead into the month of August, we've got SteamWorld Heist II all set to pull into port on August 8. The original SteamWorld Heist is one of only a few titles to ever earn a perfect 10 review score from our mighty magazine, so the hype is high for this heist! Learn more about it by just flipping this page over!

> Last time in this same space I said it looks like the Switch has started slowing down. But I may have to revise that assessment! Following the releases just above, Nintendo's just recently revealed a supersized slate of surprise titles to fill out the back half of 2024, including brand-new installments in the Mario & Luigi, Legend of Zelda and Mario Party series. We'll get into evaluating them all as we get closer to the Fall! – **LUCAS**

NINTENDO'S GETTING GRITTY!

An all-new app has just been added to the NSO lineup: a "Mature 17+" Nintendo 64 game library. So far only two titles are available within said library, but the fact that they launched an entirely new app to contain just those two titles hopefully means more will join them in the future.

For starters, we've been given Acclaim's trailblazing first-person shooter Turok: Dinosaur Hunter – the game that got the FPS category going on the N64 to begin with – as well as Rare's Perfect Dark, following up on the NSO's addition of GoldenEye 007 last year.

You might want to refer back to our coverage of GoldenEye to be able to remap the buttons on your controller to better play Perfect Dark, but the investment of effort should be worth it for at least an afternoon or two – Microsoft, who now own that IP, have recently showed off a new sequel in the series, so it's an opportune time to revisit its point of origin.

Turok is a bit less of a draw since it already came to Switch a few years ago by way of a modern remaster, but even still it's worth taking a look at just for how foundational it was in '97!

Finding Just the Right Angle

Thunderful Games is getting their signature series back up to speed with SteamWorld Heist II.

IT'S BEEN A while since we last checked in on the SteamWorld series. A few years ago, its future was looking bright: The developers at Thunderful Games had announced SteamWorld Headhunter, the franchise's biggest and most ambitious project yet. It was intended to be the brand's transition into 3D, presented as a third-person shooter with a twist: Your hero's head could pop off and attach itself to the bodies of its enemies! (But no blood or gore is involved. All the characters in these games are robots.)

Unfortunately, Headhunter never happened. (And maybe never will!) We never saw anything more of the game beyond its first teaser trailer and the handful of pieces of concept art we printed back in NF #57, and the latest word is that the title is now "on hold." That's a shame! It looked promising!

SteamWorld powered on, though, with the release of SteamWorld Build late last year. Another totally different genre brought under the umbrella of the SteamWorld brand, Build was Thunderful's take on SimCity-style urban planning and resource management gameplay . . . but it apparently hasn't sold too well, having flown too far under too many fans' radars since its release. (I'm partly to blame for that, as I never chose to cover the title here in NF before just now mentioning its existence.)

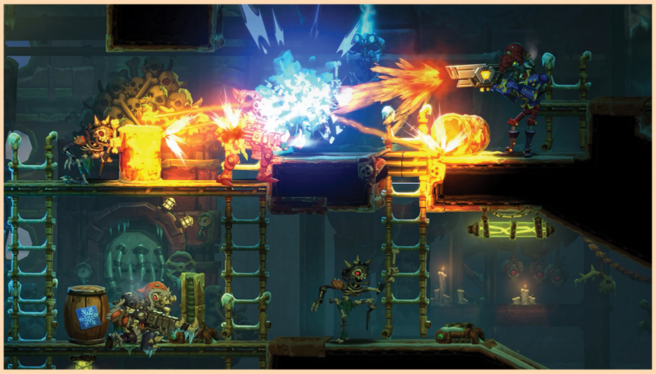
With two strikes in a row, the devs of this brand are next stepping up to the plate a little more cautiously with what looks to be a surefire hit: a direct sequel to the great SteamWorld Heist. Heist was one of the earliest entries in this genre-jumping franchise, debuting in 2015 in the 3DS eShop before being ported to other platforms. It was a turn-based tactical combat game that focused a lot of attention on angles: You sent a squad of steambots into battle in cramped confines, and were tasked to bounce their bullets in such a way that they'd ricochet off walls and floors and ceilings and hit foes who were trying to hide behind cover. Heist II will offer more of the same.

The bullet bouncing isn't the only bullet point to highlight for this sequel, though — there's also an expanded job system, allowing you to assign any of six different roles to your battling bots. Snipers get the handy laser aim assist shown above, so they can line up the perfect shot from a distance. Brawlers brute-force their way into close quarters to clobber their foes with huge hammers. Engineers can shoot twice in a single turn, Boomers can blow up whole groups of foes with explosives, Flankers can, well, *flank*, and Reapers get extra turns if they K.O. opponents with their shots.

And there's a whole exploration component too, as you guide your crew across the sea in a submarine! That's totally new for this sequel.

This series might've lost some steam, but one strong sequel is all it needs to get moving again. Here's hoping Heist II is a hit! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: THUNDERFUL GAMES
RELEASE: AUGUST 8, 2024 RATING: E10+



They're Coming by Wave

The New Denpa Men is finally hitting the Switch.

GENIUS SONORITY, the developers of the Pokémon Colosseum sub-series and creators of the Denpa Men franchise (whom we interviewed in NF about a decade ago!), are unsung heroes in the world of JRPGs. Before forming the studio in 2002, key members of the team were responsible for releasing hit Dragon Quest titles on the SNES and PS1. Now, with The New Denpa Men, they're backtracking to the top-down, turn-based role-playing genre that put them on the map, and returning to their most popular original intellectual property in the process.

But like with New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe, the "New" in this game's name may be a bit of a misnomer. Maybe "The Probably-New-To-You Denpa Men" or "Reintroducing The Denpa Men" would have been a more accurate title, as everything about the game appears poised to greet the Switch audience for the first time. Outside of the high-resolution display, nearly everything about the game looks identical to the four 3DS titles in the franchise that came before it. But that's OK, because those games are nearly impossible to get through legitimate means since the 3DS eShop shut its virtual doors for good. If you want to get these men today, this is the only way!

This free-to-play timed exclusive for the Switch appears to be an enhanced port of the Japan-only mobile title of the same name from 2017. Like all the Denpa Men games, the goal is to pick up your real-life device and catch floating, Mii-like cartoon people drifting through the radio waves in the world around you. There are many, many men to meet, and each one is a little different, with unique abilities determined by the hue of the one-piece leotards they wear. Color coordinating your party of slightly off-putting cuties is arguably half the fun – the other half comes from exploring tried-and-true RPG environments like "grassy field," "snowy area" and "volcano," then taking turns battling beasts like dinosaur tadpoles and giant sentient strawberry shortcakes.

You can also customize your characters, decorate your environment and, best of all, go fishing! It may not be all that inventive, but for the low cost of "nothing," you'd do well to pluck it from thin air when it launches on July 22! **– JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: GENIUS SONORITY
RELEASE: JULY 22, 2024 RATING: E

Time to Shoot Some Hoops!

Basketball is being added to Nintendo Switch Sports, for free!

NINTENDO SWITCH SPORTS has become an incredible success!

Though it felt a little unfinished when it first launched two years ago – and Nintendo admitted that was the case by announcing even before that launch that its Golf mode would have to be added through a later update – it still managed to get off to a strong start, sales-wise. Then, once that free Golf DLC came around right in the middle of 2022's holiday shopping season, its momentum only grew. The game continuously performed well throughout all of 2023, as well as through the first quarter of this year.

It's sold so well, in fact, that it's cracked the Top 20 on the system! Nintendo Switch Sports, as of March 31, 2024, has officially sold over 13,110,000 units, placing it right alongside major names like Mario, Pokémon and Splatoon. Not too bad for a title without a real mascot character of its own!

In order to keep that ball rolling, Nintendo has just recently revealed that they will be updating the game again with another new sport as free DLC: This time we're getting Basketball!

While Golf was a part of the Wii Sports package from Day 1 of the Wii era back in 2006, Basketball only joined the series later on, through 2009's Wii Sports Resort. It featured both 3-on-3 (a.k.a. Pickup Games) and a 3-Point Contest.

Nintendo Switch Sports' version isn't just copying Resort's approach, though. Now the Pickup Games are 2-on-2, cutting out a couple of competitors to better streamline the play experience. And while the 3-Point Contest is returning, it's also getting a new way to play: In addition to being able to challenge yourself to a solo shootout, there will also be a multiplayer version of the mode that has four ballers all putting up shots simultaneously. That means you'll have to have both accuracy to sink your shots as well as good timing, because if you toss the ball to the hoop at the same time one of your opponents does too, they'll knock each other out in mid-air!

The free DLC launches sometime this Summer. It'll probably propel the game to sell a few million more copies, don't you think? **– LUCAS**

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO
RELEASE: SUMMER 2024 RATING: E10+

Everybody Wants to Be a Cat

LITTLE KITTY, BIG CITY

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: DOUBLE DAGGER STUDIO
RATING: E

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD is a wonderful game. It brought back the classic team of four from Super Mario Bros. 2, each with their own abilities. It inserted them into a new world that combined the best aspects of 2D and 3D Mario, effectively expanding upon what had begun with Super Mario 3D Land. But there was something else it brought to the table that made it special.

The Super Bell!

With this item, Mario and his friends could transform into a new Cat form! This allowed them to run around on all fours, climb up walls and pounce upon their enemies as a cat does its prey.

Even back then, I thought to myself, “Wow. Wouldn’t it be great if there were an entire game where you just ran around a 3D environment as a cat, just doing cat stuff?”

Fast-forward about 11 years, and now we have our answer: Yes. Yes, it would.

I instantly fell in love with Little Kitty, Big City from its first trailer, all the way back in 2021, and it’s been one of my most anticipated games ever since. And with the further announcements of it coming to all my favorite platforms, including the Switch, that anticipation only grew more intense.

It also debuted in a Wholesome Games event, and that was the perfect place for it, because that’s precisely what this game is: Wholesome!

It all starts when this little black kitty gets a little *too* comfortable up on the window ledge of an apartment high-rise somewhere in Japan. One thing leads to another, and the kitty winds up down on the street, with no idea of where they are.

Don't worry, though – despite how far up Kitty has to go, the developers at Double Dagger made sure that they never get hurt throughout the course of the game. Your biggest threats come in the forms of water puddles, chained-up dogs barking (but never getting close enough to bite), and the occasional cucumber.

Kitty has to figure out how to get back up to their home, and to do that, they’re going to need the assistance of other friendly (or close enough) animals found throughout the city. The primary objective – besides getting home – is to find and eat enough fish so that Kitty can be strengthened enough to make the long climb.

But there is so much more to do than that! There are hats to collect through various means (but no Gecku hat, sadly), baby ducklings to tear away from Quack Fighter II at the local arcade, pedestrians to trip/nuzzle, shinies to collect, boxes to hop in, soccer balls to lead to their color-coordinated goals, laws of space and time to warp and bend, and much more. But above all, it’s about being a cat.

Kitty is such a lovably pleasant protagonist, too. Especially their animations, which capture everything about a cat so well, right down to the little swagger with which they walk. (Seriously, this is one game where I found walking often preferable to running just due to the animation.) And they have a certain innocence, too. For instance, when catching birds to gain feathers (and occasionally shinies), one of the local cats informs you that it’s a strictly “catch and release” neighborhood. Kitty’s response?

“Well, what else would I do with it?”

Like The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, the runtime can be what you make of it. You can finish in around two hours – maybe less if you know what you're doing – but unless you're speedrunning, that's no way to enjoy the game. You'll miss so much, and honestly, I found that the climb home can wind up a little bit less satisfying if you skip things, too. Going for broke and only using guides when I was absolutely stuck on something (usually secret achievements), I think it took me around 15 hours or so (maybe a little more) to 100% – something I don't think I've done since Donkey Kong Country 2 first came out, I'll add.

The soundtrack (which I'm listening to as I write this) is a nice, jazzy set of songs by composer Riley Koenig, which captures the casual, relaxed and occasionally spontaneous cat vibe very well. It's available on multiple services now, too.

The game holds up pretty well on the Switch, for the most part. There were a few small technical issues as I played, like the expected longer load times and more visual pop-in when compared to other versions. Though, as I continued playing, I noticed it less and less. In a bit of strangeness, the feathers dropped by birds seem to slide around a bit more here, too? None of this seemed to hamper the gameplay, however.

If you love cats, then Little Kitty, Big City gets top marks all around. It's a great, hassle-free way to kill a little time around other games, and it's good for longer – or should I say, *biiiiiig* stretches, too. It's even more fun when your own IRL cats start to watch what's happening on screen!

I've beaten it twice already since it came out, and it's left me nothing if not eager and hopeful for additional content or a sequel somewhere down the line. Until then, I look forward to coming back and revisiting this little kitty in this big city on occasion. The hardest part is going to be staying away! **– DAVID**

10

SECOND OPINION

STILL A FEW GLITCHES TO FIX

I GOT SUCKED into this one right from its first trailer. It had the vibes of Untitled Goose Game, but also had its own charm and . . . kitty cats!

I was kinda bummed that players couldn't design their own cat for the adventure, but there's something about a black cat that fits just right for this story. I have a black cat, and she is TROUBLE, but not nearly as much as this cantankerous cat's tripping of humans, knocking of various things off ledges and trespassing. Naughty, but so much fun in a schadenfreude sense.

The game does a good job of containing the area of play with a narrative of a water leak being repaired, having sections blocked with water spills that our kitty hero needs to circumvent (while also explaining the lack of cars). It's not exactly the biggest city section, but it was adequate for this bite-sized romp. The area isn't without its map holes though. I was grabbing a fish once and fell through a building – then it autosaved. This effectively locked that save file, as I couldn't regress to a previous save to avoid falling in. So, I had to start again. Double Dagger Studio's social media team welcomes players' bug reports and is on top of the issues (to the point where they've already started pushing out patches to fix some of them).

The game also has some camera issues when backing up around walls and other obstacles and navigating corners, but it's generally manageable. I was impressed with the camera during climbing sections, though. The controls can be quirky, but there's little need for precise movement, aside from climbing, which requires planning and the right amount of stamina.

I love the other animals' roles, like Tanuki's sci-fi petwork, the entrepreneurial crow, Daddy Duck with his brood and the dogs. The beetle's side story was hilarious as well, and the other cats made me laugh every time – especially the "Mayor." There is a map to help navigate the similar-looking streets, but as it's drawn with crayons by an animal it's only so helpful. It led to more immersion, honestly, as cats get their bearings based on smells and landmarks, and there was a need for backtracking for various tasks anyway.

I really liked collecting the different emotes, as each animation was spot-on and fun to perform. Napping was also a highlight. So funny! Speaking of collecting, I was surprised by the amount of collectables packed into this small space, with most leading toward completing an extensive achievement list. After the collect-a-thon, making the final climb was a brilliant wrap-up of the various storylines (provided you completed them) and was wonderfully executed.

Little Kitty, Big City is a short if somewhat glitchy affair with a fun narrative and a whimsical feel, perfect as a "game between games." **– BRETT**

7.5

You Only Have Nine Lives to Live

UMBRACLAW

GOING INTO IT, I knew what Umbraclaw was about. I thought I knew what I was getting myself into. I thought I was ready.

I wasn't.

Heck, my wife was surprised that I was even playing it at all.

Umbraclaw is about a dead cat named Kuon. The circumstances of the cat's death are left to your imagination, but the fact remains that she is dead. As someone who *loves* cats, including black cats, that made this one more difficult to approach than I thought it would be, especially right after playing Little Kitty, Big City.

It's that love of cats that makes me give warning to other cat lovers about trying this game: It can get to you emotionally, figuratively peeling back the layers of your being to strike at what lies underneath.

But in a way, that also serves as a strength of the game. As you make your way through the 2D platforming realm of the Soulplane, you're going to be challenged. Kuon is but a normal cat (at least at first), but as cats have nine lives, she has an advantage over other creatures: The more she dies, the more her spirit grows in power. She becomes more humanoid and gains new animalistic abilities – while also detaching from her feline self and losing sight of her goal, though, which is getting back to her owner, a little girl named Tsukumo. And with how cheap and instant some deaths come, these transformations can feel almost inevitable.

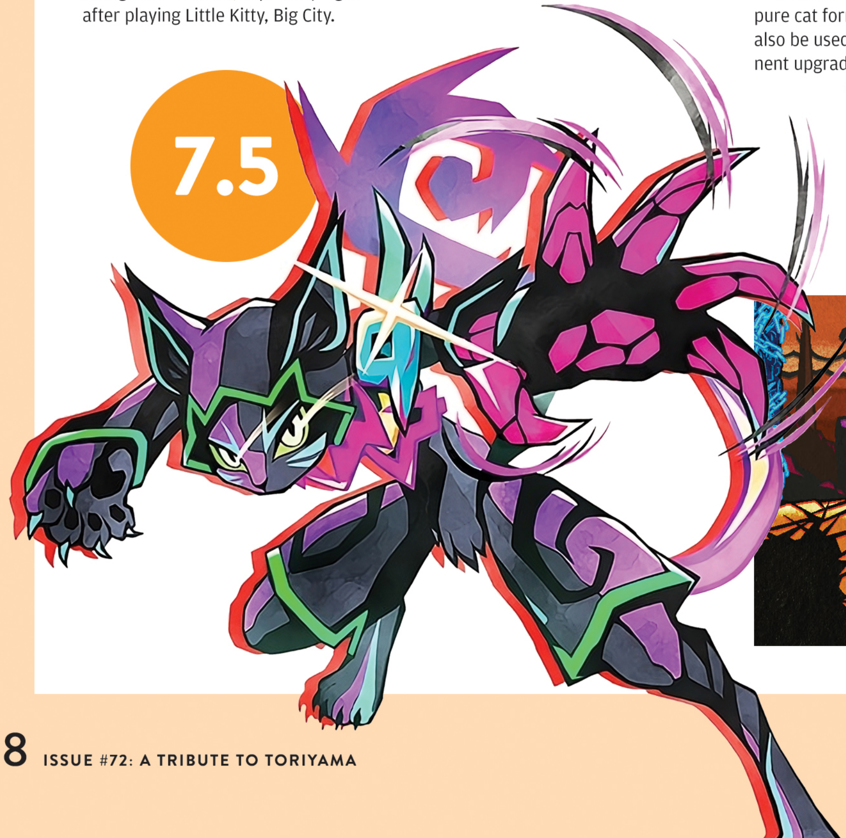
However, there is hope. Literally, there are Hope Shards that can be gathered throughout the game, and by using these, you can ensure that little Kuon doesn't lose herself like so many others in the Soulplane seem to have done, returning her to her pure cat form. But Hope Shards can also be used to help acquire permanent upgrades, leading to something of a balancing act which may be difficult to achieve, if not impossible at first (luckily, there's New Game+).

But it's that emotional connection that drives your decision making. I didn't want Kuon to lose herself and forget Tsukumo, but following that path can leave you at a disadvantage. It can be tough, and weigh on you, at least if you have any sort of emotional investment in something like this.

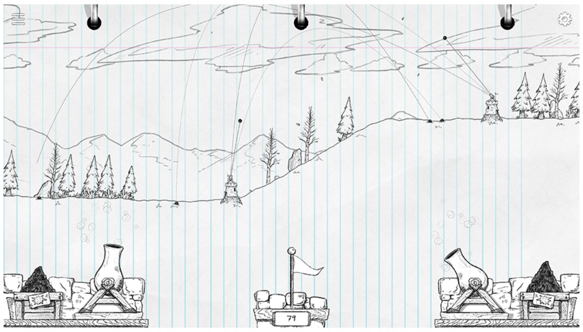
My heart felt heavy playing this, and I soon wondered if I should have taken this one on, as I seemed to keep failing Kuon. There is a pervading message of hope throughout, though, and that's part of what kept me going, as I did keep hoping that as poorly as I seemed to be doing at the game, maybe I'd be good enough to get through?

If you have the fortitude for it, there's a very challenging game to enjoy here (though you can adjust that with different difficulty levels). But much of the challenge is down to how good you are, and how much you're willing to sacrifice to become stronger. **– DAVID**

7.5



SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: INTI CREATES RATING: T



Middle School Munitions
NOTEBOOK ARTILLERY

AUSTIN IVANSMITH, previously of WayForward, has adapted some big names into games: The Mummy, Thor and DuckTales, just to name a few. His carefree love for these brands was born during his childhood, though his actual time behind the scenes with them came with massive adult responsibilities. Now that he's gone fully independent, Austin is turning back the clock to the days when he had no pressure to meet any outside standards – an age when the only goal was to poke around and have fun.

Notebook Artillery takes place entirely on lined paper, with every background and cannon rendered with perfect penmanship. Like many of his other games, it's an adaptation of a classic, but instead of a beloved comic book character, movie monster or Disney cartoon, Austin's dedicated his time to updating a freeware Macintosh computer title from 1989 called Artillery. In both the original and this ballpoint update, all you can do is adjust the angle of your cannon, change how much gunpowder you're firing with, and shoot. You have unlimited shots, so in the single-player campaign, there are no fail states. Experimenting with your options and trying to hit the targets (or two or three targets with one shot!) is the only objective. Every shot shows you the trajectory of your last blast, giving you extra information in your efforts to learn from your mistakes.

There are also two Vs. modes: one against the CPU, the other against another human player. Battling the computer can be a little too stressful at times, as all hits are one-shot kills, and there's no way of knowing when they'll take you out. Playing against another player is a little more "fair" in the traditional sense, but with randomized terrain and variable wind direction, there's still enough here to keep players guessing.

It's a great game for kids, as the barrier to entry is amazingly low. The main campaign in particular gives kids very little risk of feeling punished for mistakes. Likewise, it's also a fantastic game for any adults who are drowning in real-life stress. Unwinding to a serene, nostalgia-inducing dive into doodles offers a polar opposite experience to trying to figure out how to pay your bills or refinance your mortgage.

For others, it may all be a little too bare-bones. Most of the battlefields are relatively similar. Some have slightly more hills or cliffs than others, but playing the game for about an hour will show you pretty much all that the terrain has to offer. There's also no boss fights, bonus games, storyline or achievements. Like all of Austin's adaptations, it stays lovingly loyal to the source material. For some, that'll be a turnoff, but for this stressed-out old man and his energetic 8-year-old, battling it out after school has become a fun pre-homework treat! **– JONATHAN**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: POLYCRUNCH GAMES DEVELOPER: AUSTIN IVANSMITH RATING: E

From 1979 to 2024
LUNAR LANDER BEYOND

ATARI HAS BEEN on quite a roll lately in terms of reinvigorating their brand, making a serious effort to bring their ancient IPs to the modern world. From turning Pong into an RPG in Pong Quest to the praiseworthy Recharged series, taking the core concepts of their arcade classics and giving them some modern flair has been working like a charm. But is it possible to take modernizing a retro game too far? Lunar Lander Beyond suggests that yes, it is.

Lunar Lander has never been Atari's biggest name, but its extreme difficulty and nuanced gameplay earned it a following back in 1979. The premise is simple: land an extremely fragile spacecraft on the surface of the moon while dealing with factors like gravity, inertia and limited fuel. Lunar Lander Beyond takes that same basic gameplay and tries to make it fit into the middle of a massive narrative, and it almost succeeds! It just fails to stick the all-important landing.

Lunar Lander's gameplay is, at its core, unchanged, except they've added some new objectives: sometimes you'll have to fly through floating markers, or land on multiple platforms to rescue someone. But this is still Lunar Lander through and through, which means that regardless of the modern tweaks, this is a severely simple and often infuriating game.

So when, between stages, you're presented with a surprisingly ambitious narrative, complete with voiceovers, it winds up feeling at odds with itself. The writing is surprisingly clever, clearly taking a number of inspirations from Portal, complete with a somewhat disturbingly inhumane A.I. – but for as entertaining as it can be, these long scenes absolutely tank the pick-up-and-play nature of the game itself.

But the biggest problem is that it simply isn't very fun to play. In the original arcade release, your craft's unwieldy maneuverability was the whole point, and that worked because the stages were simple: You started at the top, chose where you wanted to land and tried to get there. But in this game, the stage layouts are complex, often encouraging exploration that your extremely limited fuel reserves, fragile ship and finicky controls are overwhelmingly ill-suited for. They did add some optional upgrades you can get for your ship that can help mitigate this frustration, like the all-important stabilizer that can stop your ship's inertia, but it comes at the expense of precious fuel. (If you run out? Game Over.)

Controlling your spacecraft feels completely unintuitive, and overcoming/mastering its quirks isn't rewarding. I admire this game's ambition, and I respect what the developers were going for here, but this one's a miss for me. **– KRIS**

5.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: DREAMS UNCORPORATED RATING: E10+

Into the Darkness
ANIMAL WELL

IT'S A RARE occurrence these days to engage in a game that truly feels mysterious. Years ago, a few adventures just had this vibe that felt like anything was possible thanks to some cryptic clues: a statue with the bizarre phrase "L is real 2401" (Super Mario 64), a sunken and perplexing book just out of reach (Super Mario Sunshine), or an inventory slot that begged to house the inaccessible Triforce (Ocarina of Time). But in a world where it's now often possible to comb through a game's code before it even releases, experiences like these have become few and far between.

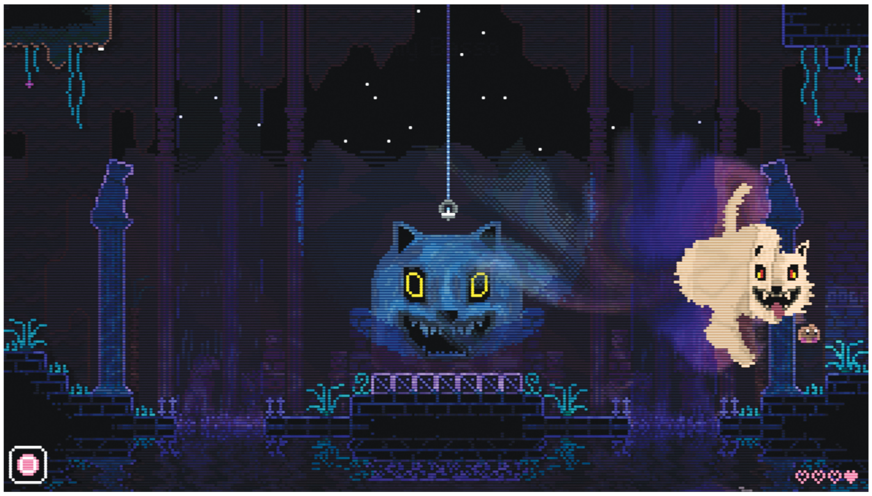
Enter Animal Well, the debut indie puzzle-platformer from developer Shared Memory and publisher Bigmode. It's an intriguing Metroid-like that features few words and even fewer combat encounters. You play as a nameless Kirby-like blob that wouldn't look out of place as the first encounter in an RPG – but the little guy sure knows how to use a bubble wand! The tools at your disposal are a playful bunch based on toys, eschewing the usual beams and bombs for trinkets like a Slinky and firecrackers. Despite their simple nature, these tools are cleverly multi-purpose and allow for some high-level play for enterprising players. For instance, the Frisbee works as an object to pacify rowdy dogs, but you can also bounce it off walls and hitch a ride on it to reach new areas.

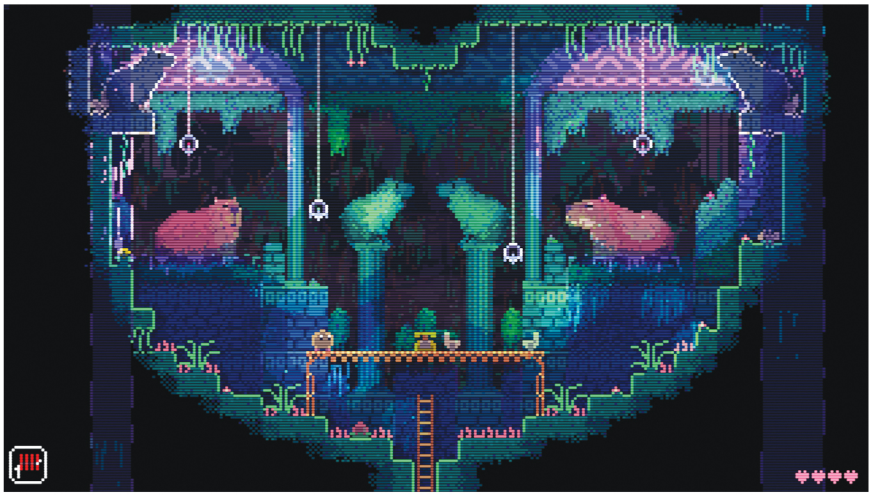
While you won't be doing much fighting, you will be encountering a menagerie of different animals roaming about the well. Some, like the Totoro-esque chinchillas, are cute and helpful, while pesky cranes or aggressive ostriches are nothing but trouble. Animal lovers will have a ball seeing how each of these beasts interact with the player throughout the journey, and like the in-game items, many animals hold a secret secondary function or two.

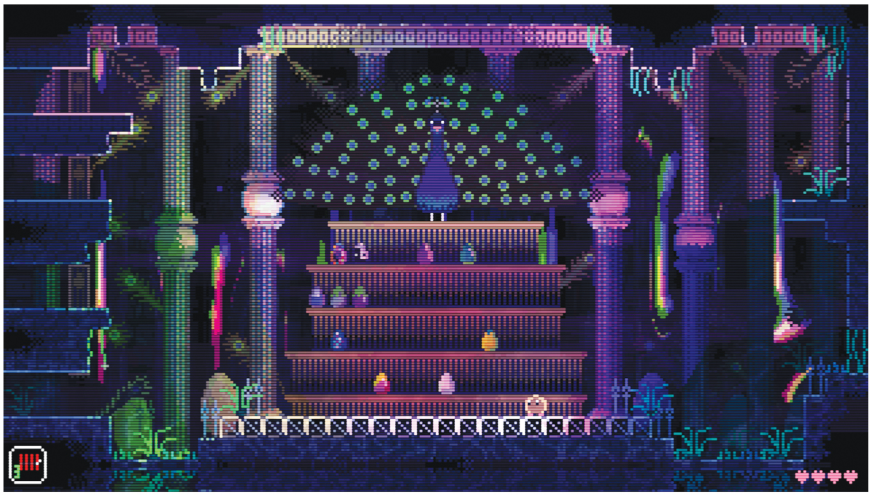
But what helps Animal Well stand apart from the crowd – and what made it something of a phenomenon upon release – are the game's so-called "layers." Apparently, the first layer is the main game itself: a MacGuffin search that introduces players to the world, features most of the tools and takes a handful of hours to conquer. This memorable quest is well-paced and fun enough to warrant a recommendation.

Then, for players who want to dig a little deeper into the well, there's a second layer of post-game fun to be had. A total of 64 Eggs are hidden throughout the game that lead to a series of intermittent rewards. They're devious to find and require players to really use their noggins; a few were so well hidden that I initially had wondered if I was the only person on Earth to discover some of them! (I wasn't.) I managed to nab them all, although I admittedly needed some online help for the last five or so. Collecting them requires some real dedication and leads to the true endgame.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BIGMODE
DEVELOPER: SHARED MEMORY RATING: E







But it goes even further! There are a series of other optional challenges (a few of which players may stumble upon) that make up the third layer of Animal Well. These are super cryptic, demanding utmost concentration and puzzle-solving, with some of them outright requiring outside interaction between players and wildly out-of-the-box thinking. If games like Tunic were too easy for you to figure out, this layer is going to be right up your alley! (And you may want to consider joining Mensa.)

However deep you plan to go, you'll enjoy the visuals. The pixel art is deceptive in that there's a lot more going on under the hood than you'd expect. The lighting effects in particular are remarkably dynamic, and while the characters are simple and kind of sketchy, they've got a cohesive and memorable look to them too.

I was less enthused about the music, in that there's hardly any of it! I understand that silence has a mood of its own, but a few memorable (and moody) songs would've gone a long way. That said, the environmental sounds are terrific, helping to craft a rich atmosphere.

It all sounds like a recipe for the next indie masterpiece, and that first layer comes close, but one big problem got my goat: After you see 90% of the map, exploration grows tiresome. While the world is enjoyably dense, with seemingly unassuming rooms being full of secrets for keen-eyed explorers, a number of late-game items required me to re-traverse everything looking for hidden secrets (consider how the Dark-Light Device works in Luigi's Mansion, to give a vague example). While the "it was under your nose the whole time!" feeling can be cool, I tend to dislike gameplay elements like these due to the drip-feed of actual new content compared to the level of backtracking required. Of the 18 hours I played, about a third of it was me banging my head against a wall trying to find just the tiniest morsels of new stuff, and it really hit the brakes on my fun.

Even so, Animal Well is an ambitious and impressive game overall, and I'm eager to see what else designer Billy Basso has up his sleeve for the future. You should at least shoot for the first set of credits, and then stick around if you can't get enough of its riddles. And hey, if you can figure those out, maybe you've got a shot at finally unraveling the mystery of that Mario 64 statue! — **MATTHEW T.**

8.5

This Game Really Slaps!

ROSE & CAMELLIA COLLECTION

SWITCH PUBLISHER: WAYFORWARD DEVELOPERS: WAYFORWARD & NIGORO RATING: T

BACK WHEN LA MULANA was originally released, I was looking it up on Nigoro's website when I found another one of their works: Rose & Camellia. It was as different from La Mulana as you can get: a Flash game in which a bullied daughter-in-law got her revenge against her late husband's family. It was ridiculous – and fun! After having gone from Flash to smartphones, the slap-fighting saga of the Tsubakikoji family has now made its grand debut on the Switch, courtesy of WayForward.

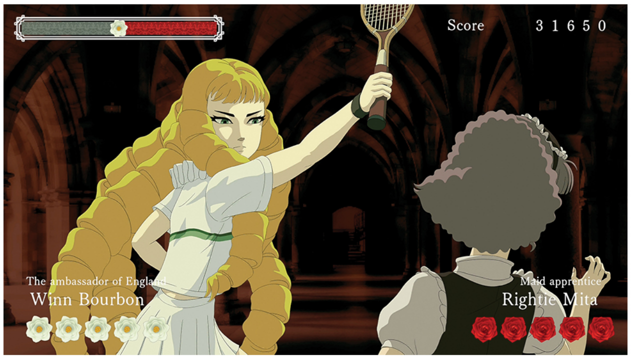
The best way I could describe Rose & Camellia would be part Punch-Out!!, part gothic soap opera and part 1970s shojo anime aesthetic. As the newly widowed Reiko Tsubakikoji, you are defending your honor against the barbs and insults of the noble house you married into in the only way possible for a noble woman: dishing out the hurt, "Will Smith at the Oscars"-style. The entire package consists of five scenarios, with four comprising the main story and a fifth as a crossover with La Mulana. The first two scenarios are relatively tame – if you can call them that – while the last two turn the wackiness level up to 11.

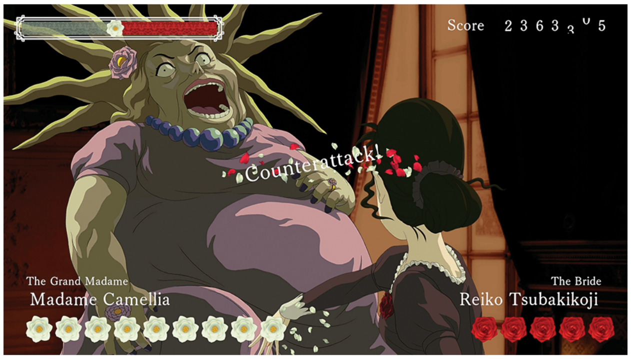
The game can be played either via the touchscreen (which is more faithful to the original Flash game) or with motion controls, and I found the motion controls to be much easier to use. There's also a two-player motion control option which is basically a one-on-one duel. Touchscreen play involves swiping a hidden weak point to score a potential critical hit, while with the motion controls it's as easy as holding down an extra button while you swing your Joy-Con. The touchscreen sometimes barely registered any input, despite showing a trail from my pointer finger on the screen. Unfortunately, this pretty much freezes out anyone whose primary system is a Nintendo Switch Lite, and I really hope that there will be an update to improve the touchscreen controls in the future.

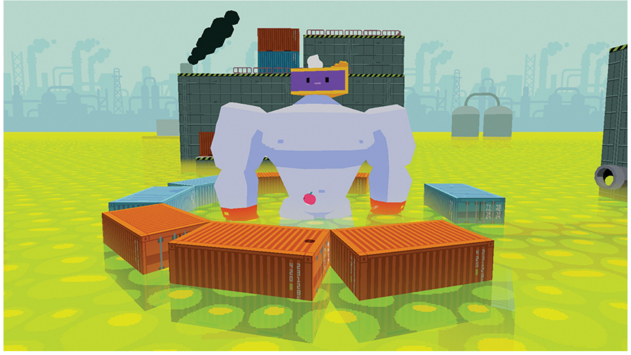
As expected with WayForward, the production values for this collection are through the roof: English and Japanese voice acting, an animated opening and ending sequence and the aforementioned final two chapters, which involve a Street Fighter-esque world tour with references to Rocky, Saint Seiya and Kaiji, as well as a truly absurd stream of unwanted guests. The La Mulana crossover includes some hilarious meta humor, as Mulbruk slaps her way to being known as the games' true heroine, but it felt more like a shoehorned-in promo. There are also a few proofreading and text spacing errors that detracted from the overall presentation.

For the $19.99 price, this is an excellent budget release, but it is essentially a collection of Flash games that have been updated and upscaled for home consoles. You can easily breeze through them in a few hours, and there's not much in the way of bonus content, but it's a good way to spend an afternoon. *(Also: Is it just me, or is anyone else wondering exactly* how *Reiko's husband died?)* **– REBECCA**

7.0







Return of the Rad Radish Dad

DADISH 3D

TRANSITIONING A 2D game brand into 3D has always presented challenges. Some series made this leap gracefully, like Mario and Zelda. Others didn't, like Castlevania and Contra. Then there's Dadish, which lands somewhere in the middle. Thanks to the series' inherently abstract nature, maintaining its unique identity and specific style of gameplay in 3D works fairly naturally. But after playing it to its conclusion, I have to wonder, was it worth the effort?

Dadish games are simple. They're basic platformers with a great sense of humor, catchy music and cheerful, charming visuals. They aren't perfect on a technical level, but because they never get overly ambitious, it all works brilliantly. You're a radish who is also a Dad. In each game, your children find some excuse to run away from home, and you have to chase after them through increasingly difficult stages. This time around they follow a pop-up Internet ad that somehow materializes in real life, which is exactly as silly as it sounds. It's good fun, but putting it in 3D really doesn't do it any favors.

It's difficult to tell where you and the things around you are in 3D space. Dadish has a shadow that always stays underneath him, but everything else, including enemies, cast shadows based on where the lighting is coming from, making it incredibly hard to tell whether or not you're about to make or miss a crucial jump, or if that flying slice of pizza is about to kill you. Jumping french fry boxes are a hazard in 2D – but in 3D you can simply walk right past them. Even the enormous Daikon "Madish" chase levels that were really fun and stressful in 2D are reduced to cakewalks, as you can simply hide behind a piece of the level and he'll go right by you.

But by far the worst offenders are the auto-scrolling Burgurgular stages (he's a burger burglar, get it?), where the camera becomes locked, making landing jumps an exercise in utter frustration.

Doom and gloom aside though, this is still Dadish through and through. If you've ever played the previous games in the series, it translates remarkably faithfully into 3D. The dialogue is still absolutely hilarious, and well worth the effort it takes to have those wonderfully bizarre conversations with your lunatic children, and the new bosses are downright hysterical. One cereal-themed boss in particular had me cracking up so hard I had to put my controller down and catch my breath before I could properly begin the fight.

The soundtrack is top-notch once again as well, with some serious earworms that won't leave your head for days. The visuals, though, have a "PlayStation 1" look to them, and while they come off as pretty cool, a lot of the original games' pixel-art charm was lost in the process. This is Dadish, but worse. It's not *bad*, and I don't blame the developer for trying something new. It's a neat experiment, but one that proves that if it ain't broke, don't fix it! **– KRIS**

6.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: THOMAS K. YOUNG RATING: E

Find Friends in Flight

SKY: CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

IS THIS A GAME? An experience? An art piece? Honestly, I fell in love with Thatgamecompany in the early PS3 days with Flower and Journey, and I would absolutely describe both as blurring the lines between game and art.

In Sky: Children of the Light, you can definitely see the inspiration from the developer's previous outings. There was a seven-year gap after Journey, as Thatgamecompany released Sky in 2019. So why review it now? Skyfest! Celebrating its five-year anniversary, in-person events will be held in July in Tokyo and in China with partner company Netease. Can't go to either of these locales? The occasion will also be recognized in-game in the Aviary Village, with special events, items and plenty of fans.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: THATGAMECOMPANY
RATING: E10+

The game is still prevalent today because of seasonal additions, new areas opening up and a strong fanbase – but it's also somewhat of a social experiment, bringing the strongest part of Journey into a new era. Journey had multiple people online who would come in and out of each player's experience, helping and guiding one another. Sky works the same way, as players can ask for assistance or to be saved by other players. There's nothing quite like a total stranger getting you out of a jam, and then helping lead you out of the dangerous area.

It's easy to tell who the seasoned veterans (or deep pockets) are by all the cosmetics people choose to wear. This is where the game gets into currencies and microtransactions, but as these are completely optional, I don't necessarily have a problem with it. To me, it just detracts somewhat from the experience to covet the antlers or the sparkly poncho that someone else has.

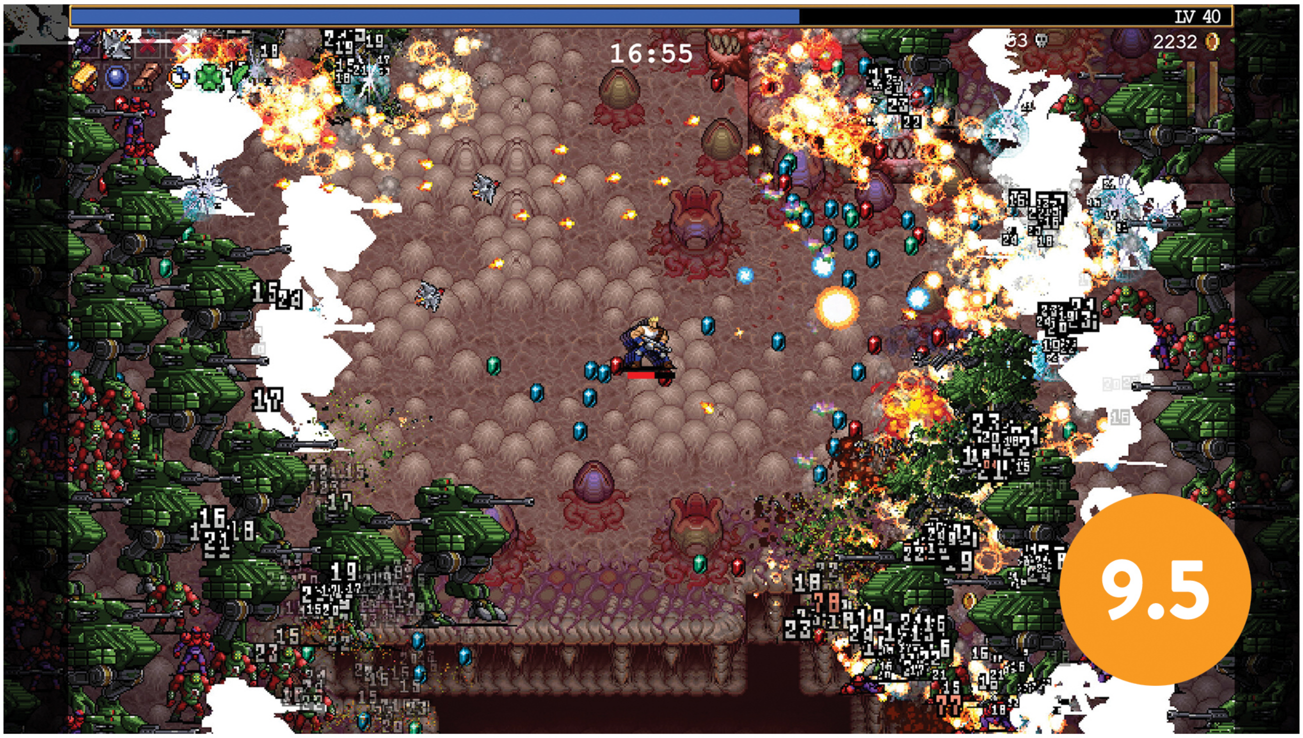
There are six areas where the bulk of the game happens. Between these levels is your home base and the Aviary Village, where you can change how you look and spend Candles. The last area is the Eye of Eden, where a cycle is played out each time you reach it, essentially giving a bonus for accomplishments and "rebirthing" back into the world to do it all again. More trips means more currency to buy more goods and the availability to buy them. Many things like masks, hairstyles, ponchos, headgear and props like instruments can be bought, whereas emotes can be learned from the saved spirits in the various areas.

Once a spirit is found, it kicks off a mini quest. More often than not the quest is following them to their shell to wake them up and save them. Sometimes it's more substantial, like collecting pieces with friends, or opening an area with assistance. They're all neat puzzles and the constellation spirits, once saved, allow players to buy abilities, spells and other things.

There's a lot to do! Most of which players will likely miss on their first playthrough. There are several ways to interact with players, including using emotes when standing next to them, leaving audio, text or animated messages for others to find or becoming friends. Adding a friend can mean enjoying all of the game together through planned play sessions, asking for help or swapping hearts.

For a free game, this is above and beyond what I would expect. And it's also gorgeous! Generally, a free game will limit your play in some way or constantly dip into your pocket, but this one can be fully enjoyed without spending a dime. Its ephemeral quality also invites multiple playthroughs, and many hours can be spent finding all the spirits and the nooks and crannies where other collectables lie. Whether you're a vet or a noob, give this one a try soon! **– BRETT**

8.5



Crossover with the Contra Crew

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS: OPERATION GUNS

WHEN VAMPIRE SURVIVORS released its Emergency Meeting crossover DLC last year, it opened the door to a whole new kind of upgrade for the game. It wasn't just a new stage and weapons based on Among Us – they actually incorporated elements of how that game plays *into* Vampire Survivors (which, if you've played both games before, you know is completely nuts). It also got fans wondering if they would be able to do it again with more crossovers. Well, the answer to that is YES, and the game choice is just as off-the-wall as the last one.

When you think of Vampire Survivors and Konami, Castlevania obviously seems like it would be the most sensible choice – but if you've spent any time with V.S., you know the game is anything but sensible.

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: PONCLE RATING: T

It's all about chaos and, for lack of a better phrase, attacking aggressively, so Contra is a surprisingly natural fit. It's still incredibly weird to see the Vampire Survivors cast (and the Among Us characters) running around with Spread guns, but it fits perfectly in with the whole "so crazy it's brilliant" motif that fuels so much of V.S.'s personality.

Operation Guns nets you two new stages. Neo Galuga is an amalgamation of several classic Contra areas like the Jungle (exploding bridges included) and a ruined city straight out of Contra III. The other stage is Hectic Highway, where your character is put on one of Contra's famous hover bikes and the stage blasts by as an autoscroller. This one presents a unique challenge because any treasure chests and gems that fall will whiz right by if you aren't careful!

In addition to the stages, there are 10 new characters (including fan favorite Brad Fang and a hilarious Castlevania spoof I won't spoil here), and 22 new weapons and evolutions ranging from the C-U-Laser to the Homing Miss (homing missiles that don't quite always hit their targets). And of course, no Vampire Survivors update would be complete without a whole new set of missions and achievements to cross off your checklist.

While it would be easy to assume this was some sort of cynical tie-in for WayForward's new Contra game, Operation Guns cuts way deeper than that. Yes, there are characters and elements from Operation Galuga, but it also pulls heavily from the entire series history, with a particular focus on Contra III and Hard Corps.

There's even a special boss encounter in the Neo Galuga stage that's ripped straight out of The Alien Wars, and it's as awesome as it is shockingly accurate.

As far as incorporating Contra elements into the game, that comes in the form of those floating football-shaped pods that periodically appear in Contra games. They don't give you weapons anymore, as that's handled through V.S.'s traditional weapon-leveling system, but shooting them still makes the familiar weapon icons spawn, which now augment your abilities. The R power-up gives your weapons temporary rapid fire, while the B power-up gives you a shield, and so on.

Then there's the music, which is a brilliant combination of over a dozen classic tunes from throughout Contra's past with that unmistakable Vampire Survivors flare.

It's impossible to overstate just how awesome this DLC pack is, especially considering it only costs a whopping $2.49. It's basically a dream come true for fans of both Contra and Vampire Survivors, and you can tell that the developers had a blast making it. Operation Guns cannot be missed! **– KRIS**

Be the Last Pac-Man Standing

PAC-MAN MEGA TUNNEL BATTLE: CHOMP CHAMPS

PAC-MAN 99 WAS GREAT. It was a fresh, unique way to take the classic Pac-Man formula online.

Unfortunately, Pac-Man 99 is gone, and in its place, we have this.

Pac-Man Mega Tunnel Battle: Chomp Champs might be one of the most awkward game names ever. I know a game's title doesn't really have much bearing on its quality, but in this case it's emblematic of just how poorly this game has been executed overall.

On paper, it's actually a neat concept: You jump online and get dropped into a match with a bunch of other players, each with their own board. The stages are laid out like regular Pac-Man levels with dots, Power Pellets, ghosts, etc. As you play, doors open up to other players' stages, where you can invade and eat their dots, ghosts and fruit – and if you're feeling especially feisty, you can chomp the players themselves.

New to this game are power-ups that appear from time to time. They're nice enough, but none of them ever feel all that useful or clever. The way they work is unnecessarily complicated, too: You can store items, but only if you're holding down a button when you pick them up. Otherwise, they'll immediately trigger, instead of being automatically stored for you to use when you want.

Periodically, missions will appear at the top of the screen that you need to complete before a timer runs out. Usually they have something to do with performing specific actions like using an item or eating three ghosts in another player's maze. The consequences of failing a mission aren't all that clear, though. In fact, a lot of this game is just way too vague! There's no counter of how many players are left during a match, or any way of telling how well you're doing. (This information might be in the game somewhere, but it's not in the tutorial, and it's not really the kind of info you should have to dig for.)

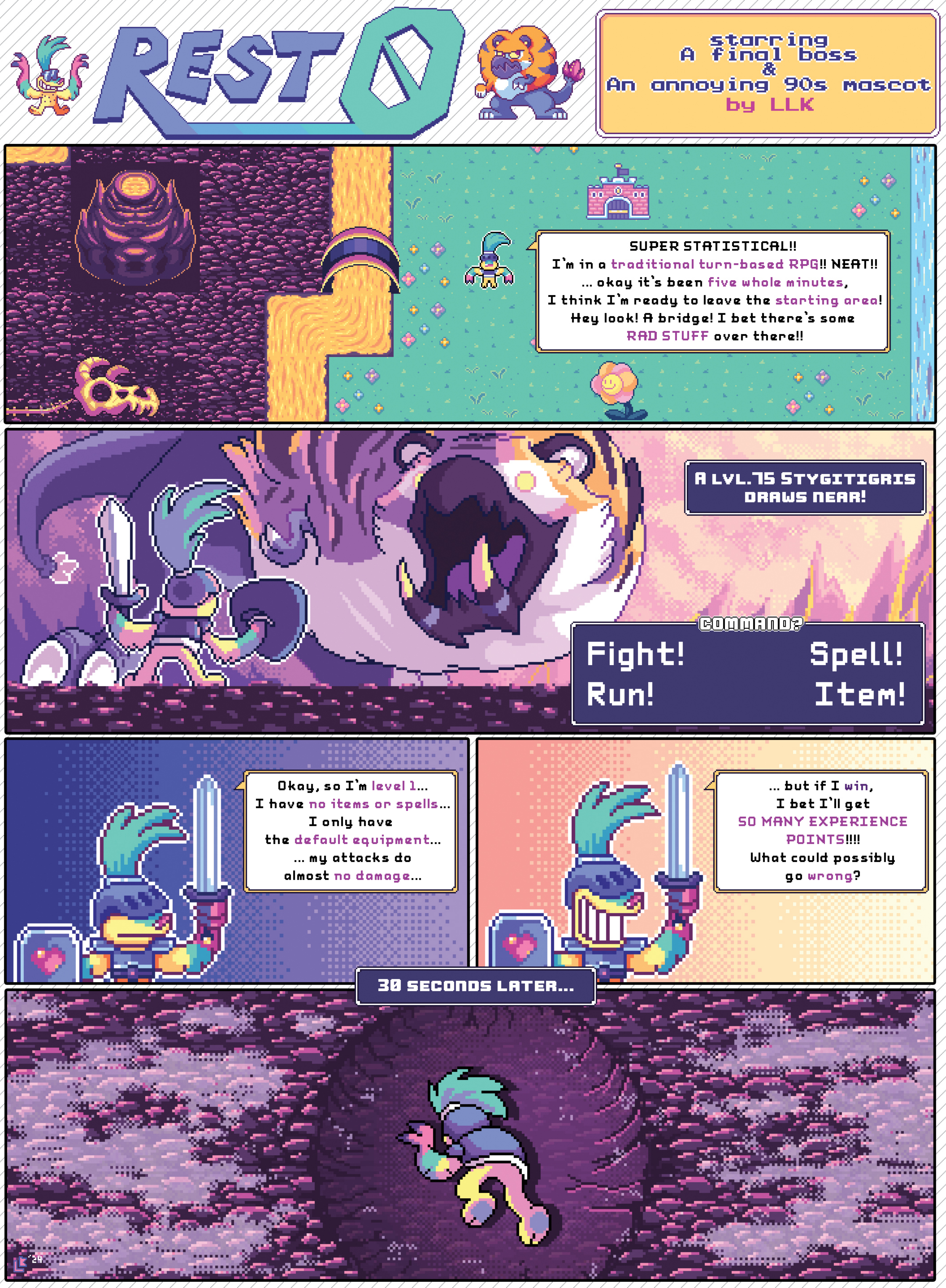
The game does look nice, with numerous outfits and skins to apply to your character and stages. The ghosts all have their own unique facial expressions, and the "kill screen" effect that shows up when various portals open and close is a nice touch. But the actual movement doesn't feel rewarding. In Pac-Man: Championship Edition, for example, when you eat a ghost, or time is running low, there are visual and audio markers that make it exciting. This game just kind of . . . happens.

The Switch version in particular also has some performance issues. Online lag can be rough, the framerate is inconsistent, and not once was I able to join a match without sitting in a lobby for at least a solid minute, even with cross-platform play turned on.

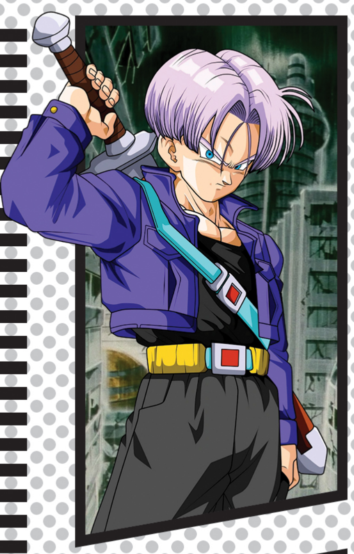
Chomp Champs can best be described as "middling." It's got some neat ideas, but it fails to capitalize on them in any meaningful way. With so many other great Pac-Man games out there, it's tough to recommend this one. It's not necessarily *bad*, but it isn't exactly good either. **– KRIS**

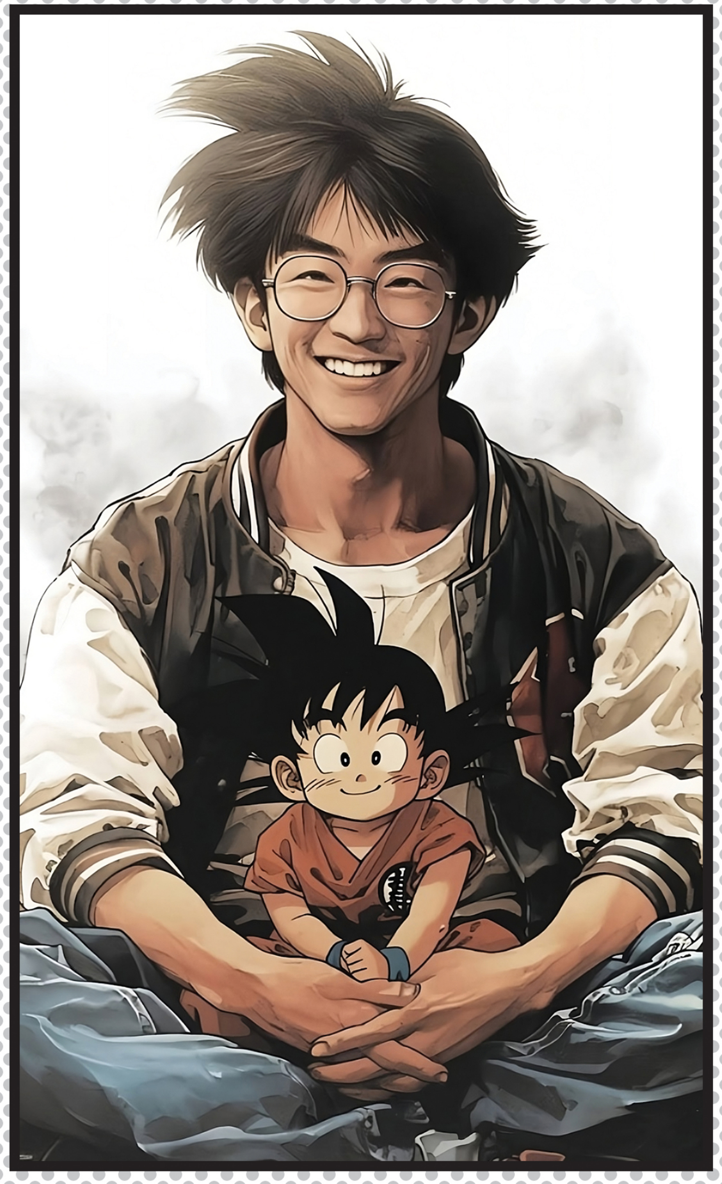
SWITCH
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: AMBER STUDIO
RATING: E

5.0

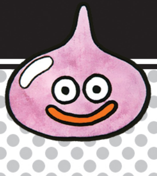


BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING





鳥山氏への追悼 A TRIBUTE TO TORIYAMA

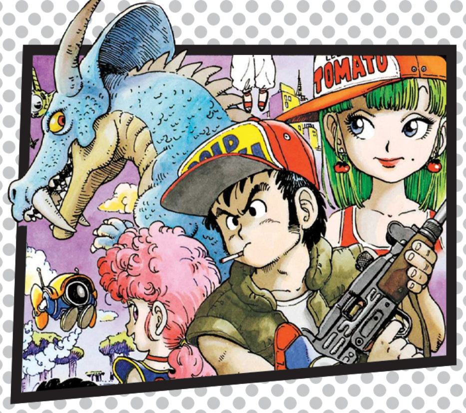


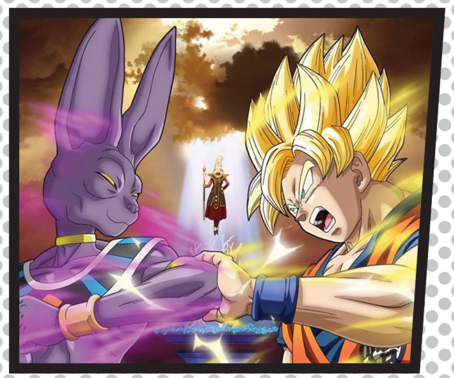
The Master of Manga

IF OSAMU TEZUKA is considered the god of manga, then Akira Toriyama can be considered the master of shonen manga. His trademark style, developed over a career that spanned almost 50 years, helped bring the distinctive style of Japanese manga and anime to audiences around the world, influencing both popular culture and whole new generations of creators.

Toriyama was born in Nagoya, Japan, in 1955, and was inspired to become an artist by both Tezuka's Astro Boy and Disney animation. He was also a huge fan of kung fu and sci-fi movies. After graduating from a technical high school, he went to work as an artist for an advertising agency, but didn't mesh with the corporate culture and quit after a couple of years. He decided to submit short stories to manga magazine contests in the late 1970s, and it was his entries to Shonen Jump's Monthly Newcomer Award that gained the attention of Kazuhiko Torishima, who would become his first editor. After a few short stories and one-shots, Toriyama began his first hit series, Dr. Slump.

Arale Norimaki, a nearsighted robot girl, lives with her big brother and inventor Senbei "Dr. Slump" Norimaki and her friends in Penguin Village, where she spends her time performing bizarre feats of super strength, catching criminals by accident and obsessing over poop. Most of the Dr. Slump chapters were self-contained, but there were story arcs surrounding events like the Penguin Village Grand Prix and Senbei's marriage to/honeymoon with Midori Yamabuki, Arale's gorgeous teacher. It was one of the biggest multimedia franchises of the early 1980s, spawning an anime and film series and all sorts of toys and other merchandise.





After the success of Dr. Slump, Toriyama started his next series, Dragon Ball, which was based on the Chinese epic Journey to the West. Son Goku was a young boy with a monkey's tail who teamed up with the inventor Bulma, the girl-phobic thief Yamcha and the shapeshifting piggy Oolong to find the seven Dragon Balls, which would grant a single wish when gathered together. Many of the Dragon Ball hunts were races against time against foes like Emperor Pilaf, the Red Ribbon Army and the Demon King Piccolo, who gave Goku and friends the biggest challenge of their young lives! A few years later, after Goku and his wife Chi-Chi gave birth to their son Gohan, the reason for Goku's monkey tail was revealed: He was a Saiyan, sent to Earth as a baby to destroy all life! This was the turning point where Dragon Ball went from a martial arts comedy to an interstellar battle epic, with Goku, his allies and even his foes-turned-allies all fighting against myriad enemies, from the planet destroying Frieza to the seemingly unstoppable Perfect Cell and Majin Buu.

After Dragon Ball ended, Toriyama took a step back from his defining work to publish some short stories, but returned in 2012 to assist in the character creation and writing of the first Dragon Ball Z movie in 17 years, Battle of Gods, modeling the appearance of antagonist Beerus on his Cornish Rex cat. His involvement continued with the next two films, as well as the sequel series Dragon Ball Super, where he was in charge of the scenario and character creation for the manga and anime. A few months before his untimely death, Toriyama announced his involvement in a new anime, Dragon Ball Daima, where Goku and his allies will once again fight evil forces — but this time de-aged into children!

The day that Toriyama's death was announced, he was not only memorialized by his fellow creators, but also by heads of state — demonstrating how he was not only an inspiration to Dragon Ball's primary audience, but to fans across the world. And that impact all started in simple black-and-white manga pages! **— REBECCA**

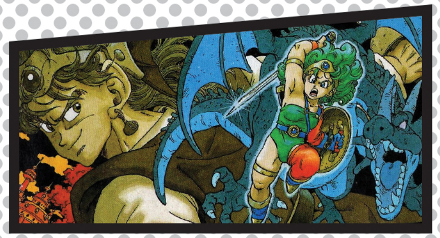
Imagining Dragons

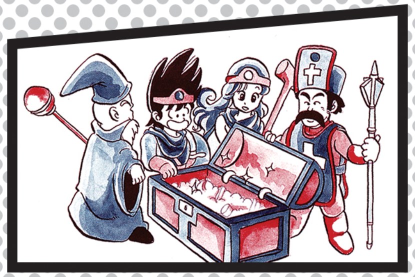
"A SLIME DRAWS NEAR!"

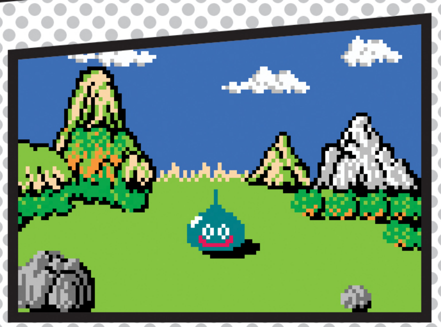
The earliest memory I have of the Dragon Quest series is seeing that phrase below a blue, tear-shaped creature sporting round, innocent eyes and a wide smile. I was 7 or so, very much unable to make sense of the opaque Ultima Exodus and still a few years away from falling in love with Final Fantasy III (SNES). But seeing that goofy little Slime was the very first moment when I felt drawn into an RPG. This wasn't some unpleasant, faceless fantasy monster – this was cute! This was endearing! This was Dragon Quest! (Well, it was "Dragon Warrior" at the time, but I digress.)

The 1980s were big for Akira Toriyama. He was working hard on Dragon Ball, which had become a major hit, and his editor Kazuhiko Torishima suggested that he handle the art for an upcoming RPG. Toriyama, a casual gamer at the time, didn't even know what an RPG was, but decided to accept the work as a side project. Dragon Quest's similarity to the name "Dragon Ball" was purely coincidental, but its creator Yuji Horii did write for Weekly Jump and the two visionaries had actually met before. Horii gave Toriyama some simple instructions along with early sketches for the game's monsters, which the artist then redesigned and polished. Little did they know that Dragon Quest would go on to become a household name in Japan and a series defined by its signature visual flair!

It's no secret that Toriyama had a distinctive style, almost to a fault. But where some critics might claim his characters looked too similar to each other, I see the familiarity as a major point of entry for DQ. In Japan in particular, the computer RPG was a dense, nigh-impenetrable type of game with niche appeal. Horii wanted to design something that could reach the masses but still kept the addictive and adventurous aspects of the genre intact. And a big part of that appeal was in getting a talented manga artist to whip up compelling designs. It made an impression on 7-year-old me at least – and millions of players in Japan, apparently!







In hindsight, a game like DQ really was a perfect fit for Toriyama. While most early NES games struggled with giving their tiny sprites personality, the larger, inanimate creatures of DQ's first-person battling had charm to spare. They all featured distinct silhouettes, poses, eye-catching color palettes and other staples of strong art. Drackys and Ghosts gleefully grinned while plotting their next mischievous move, Magicians reached towards players as if casting a spell, and battle-ready Skeletons stomped forward menacingly.

And that was just the beginning! As the games continued, the baddies got battier, some of them getting cuter than ever while others were cool and imposing – a dichotomy that influenced the design of plenty of later successful RPGs like Pokémon. DQ sequels added treasure chest Mimics, goofy Goodybags, morphing monsters, flatulent ferrets and some truly bizarre final boss demons. Toriyama had an eye for iconic human designs, but in my opinion, his monsters were where he truly shined, and DQ had no shortage of 'em.

Not that the humans weren't incredibly iconic in their own right! Just check out the myriad of Japanese players' reaction videos to Hero's unveiling in Smash (long overdue, if you ask me)! And almost as exciting was DQXI's protagonist being joined by the heroes from DQIII, IV and VIII shortly after. As these fellows are largely avatars for the player, it's up to the visual design to really sell the character of them, and DQIII's hero is especially popular (look forward to guiding him in the upcoming HD-2D remake!). You might even say that the leading lads of these games are essentially Japan's version of Disney's princesses: a group that never officially met but make for one memorable set of do-gooders!

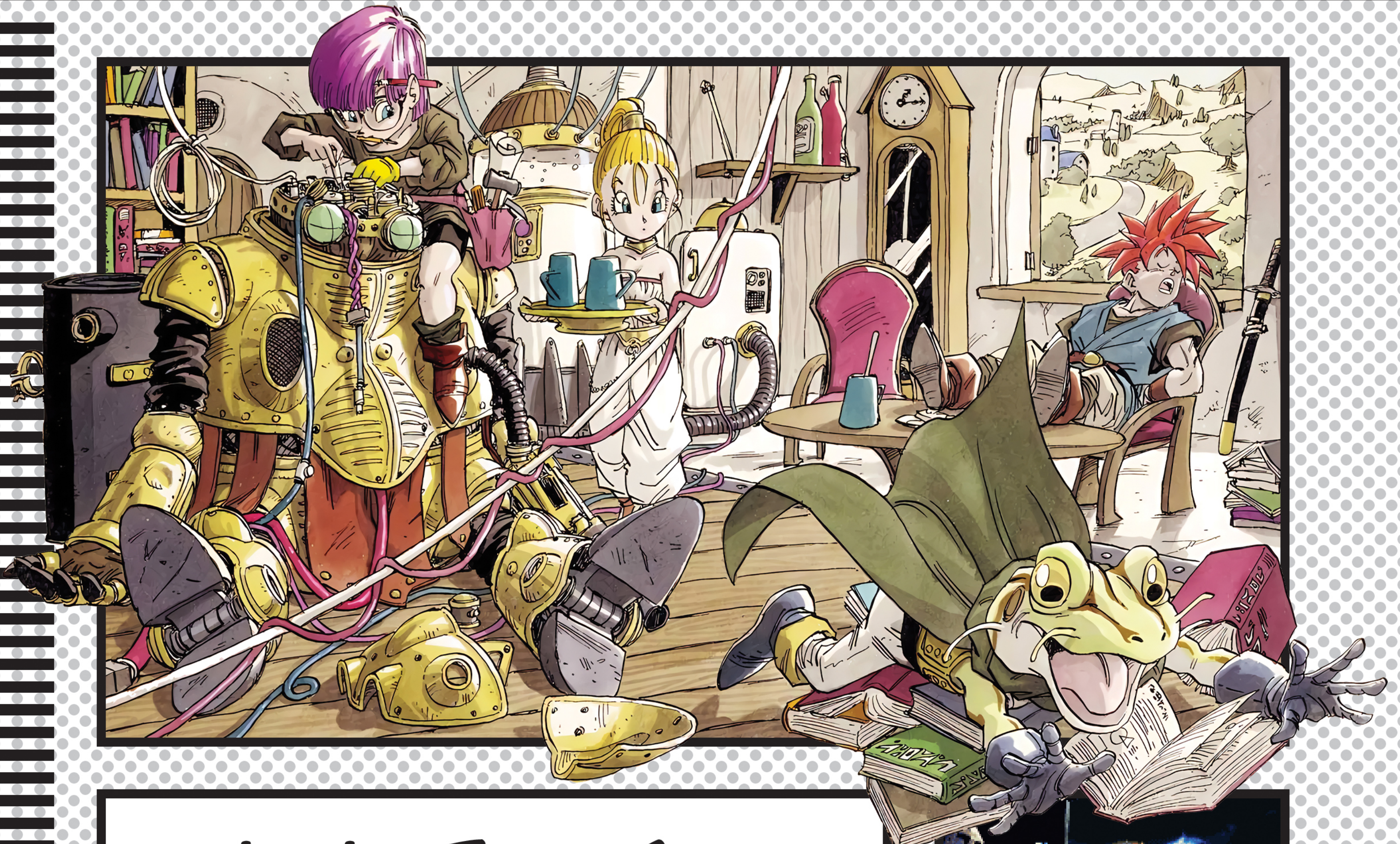
And roughly as beloved as the hero lineup are the supporting characters. This cast tends to pop up in a variety of spin-offs and side games and it's always a thrill to see them. DQIV was really the first game in the series to feature fleshed-out, truly vivacious party members, which was particularly impressive in 1990.

There was Alena, the carefree tomboy princess; Kiryl, her hapless retainer who harbors a crush on her; the revenge-seeking sisters Maya and Meena; and Torneko Taloon, a jolly merchant so popular that he spearheaded his own series! (See Page 53!) DQV let you take the hand of a heavenly bride of your choosing, and DQVI's Terry was another character who went on to star in his own spin-off series: the Dragon Quest Monsters games, which are still going strong. (See Page 60!)

DQVII includes Ruff, a scrappy wolf-turned-boy, and Maribel, the Helga Pataki of DQ complete with a love-it-or-hate-it personality. Even better, DQVIII features the most beloved cast since IV, including the adorably cockney thief Yangus, the spunky Jessica, the self-assured templar Angelo and the muppet-like King Trode. This lineup really tapped into Toriyama's talents – a real rogues' gallery of goofballs as memorable as they were lovable. But it's DQXI – the latest game in the series – that probably has my favorite cast of all, with charming thief Erik, sassy brat Veronica, warmhearted mage Serena, the dignified Jade, the kooky but earnest Rab and the bright-eyed, flamboyant Sylvando. They're the collective result of decades of great character design and I love them.

Which brings us to Dragon Quest XII. Sadly, it will be the last DQ game that Akira Toriyama will have worked on. He played a huge role in shaping the style of this series and this upcoming game will contain his final contributions to Yuji Horii's world. It's sure to be a bittersweet experience, like the end of an era. But I'm still greatly looking forward to savoring the adventure of a new DQ again just like I first did so many years ago.

See, it all comes back to that ubiquitous little Slime. While Dragon Quest features its share of tearjerker sequences and darker moments, that nigh-harmless, ever-chipper Slime reminds us that this is still a series all about charm and fun. And I'm sure Dragon Quest will continue to make me smile for years to come! Thanks, Akira Toriyama! **— MATTHEW T.**

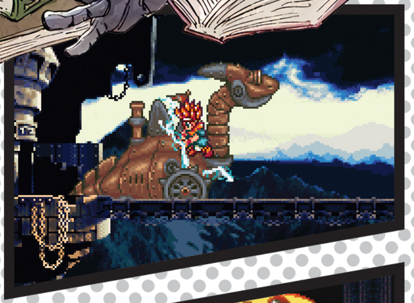


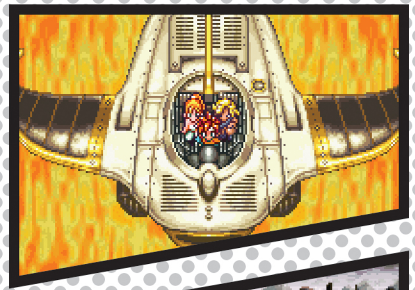
An All-Time Epic

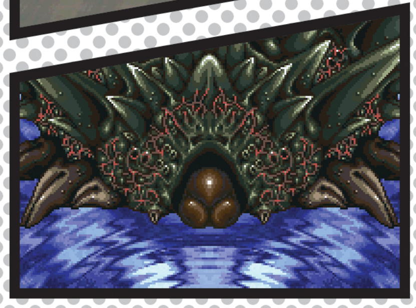
WHAT IF THE Dad of Dragon Quest (Yuji Horii), the father of Final Fantasy (Hironobu Sakaguchi) and famed manga and character artist Akira Toriyama all got together to make a game as a team? Talks between these three started in 1992, and over the course of a year the trio had fleshed out the characters and the premise for what would become Chrono Trigger. Then, following a couple of years of development, the final product was released in March of 1995 (August for the USA).

Chrono Trigger was birthed from a brainstorm about combining Final Fantasy with Dragon Quest, and eventually they landed on a theme of time travel. Famously, the final character designs were all drawn by Toriyama, but from interviews in Japanese magazines from that era, it was revealed that it was Horii who first came up with the characters and then passed off rough sketches to Toriyama. Apart from refining the seven playable characters, the look of the game was all Toriyama's art being translated to pixels. He created the look of each era, drawing out the maps and also designing the famous battle scene images. These scenes drove a lot of the narrative, with writers and other developers staring at them and getting ideas from the art for subplots, major events and more. Any time I come across them, they always get pored over for several minutes, bringing me back into the world and often noticing a detail that had escaped me before. Meeting enemies in the field, working together in battle and the characters themselves all stem from these beautiful masterpieces.

It's important to note that both Horii and Sakaguchi regarded Toriyama as the legend working on the project – the true star. The three respected each other immensely for their previous works, but it was Toriyama who really created the world visually, and that cascaded into the rest of development.



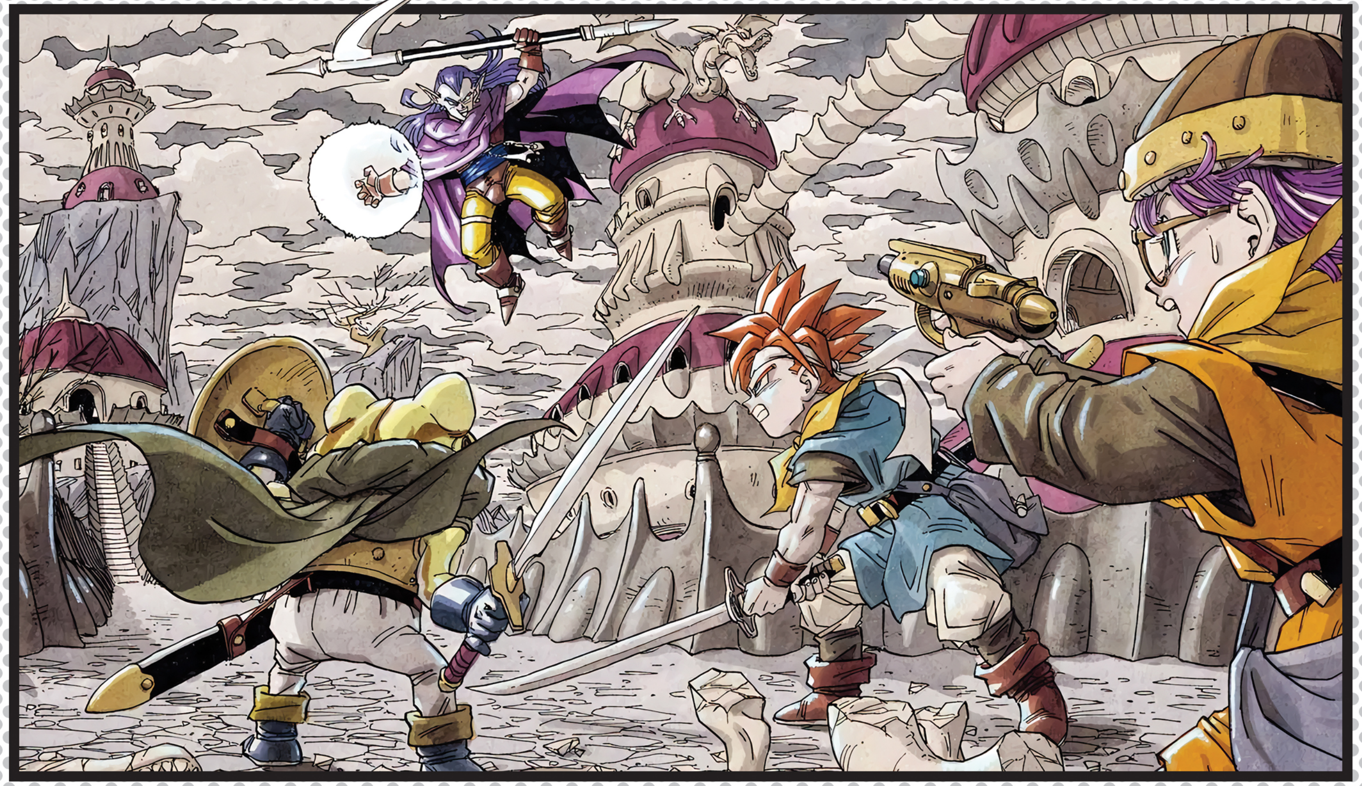




The scenes also provided the look of the areas the characters would walk through on their adventure, and there was great effort to faithfully recreate Toriyama's art into 16-bit graphics. Several developers reported that the effort was painstaking, but not without communication. Masanori Hoshino, a graphics director, said that Ayla's design was changed because many felt she should have wilder hair, being a prehistoric girl. Toriyama took the note and gave her untamed blonde locks, reworking the concept art. Most of the monsters in the game were also designed by Toriyama. Tsutomo Terada, who was in charge of converting the monster concept art to in-game graphics, said adapting the artist's efforts was difficult because Toriyama would only draw characters from the front. This led to a lot of guesswork when it came to animating them and presenting them as they appeared in battle or story scenes. Masato Kato also contributed many character designs, set designs and scenarios which Toriyama would then sketch out. All the game's modes of transport were also masterminded by Toriyama, meaning he designed the time-hopping Epoch, the gigantic Blackbird and even the futuristic jetbike. To think that the races in the future against Johnny were all built off of the team seeing one sketch!

The game was meant to ship on a CD for Nintendo's PlayStation, but once Sony and Nintendo fell out, they moved toward a 24-bit cartridge. Ultimately they used a 32-bit model, so the project was scaled back and then added to multiple times. While some of Toriyama's work was scrapped or adapted between mediums, a lot of it was reincorprated in the final work. Years later the game was ported to Sony's PlayStation, with the addition of several fully animated cutscenes that further showcased Akira Toriyama's style. (They looked a lot like a Dragon Ball episode!)

Chrono Trigger has assuredly stood the test of time, and Toriyama's work on the project has a lot to do with its longevity. The artist did well with the juxtaposition of Final Fantasy's dark themes and Dragon Quest's cartoonish character style. With simple penstrokes and color, he steered a narrative and built a world that fans have come back to for decades. It may even endure for eras. Epochs. Eons, even! **— BRETT**



Lesser-Known Games

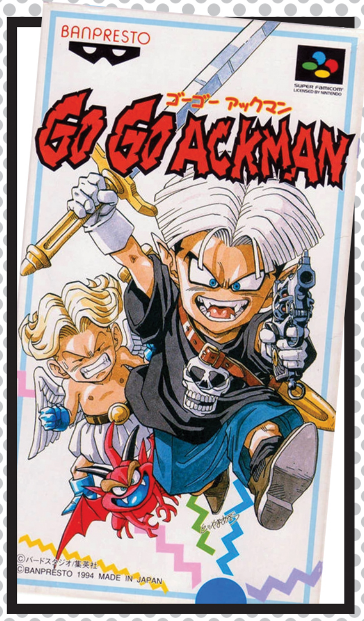
AS IN-DEMAND AS Akira Toriyama was and continued to be throughout the decades, it's no surprise that many of his game contributions slipped under the radar, whether due to niche appeal or lack of localization.

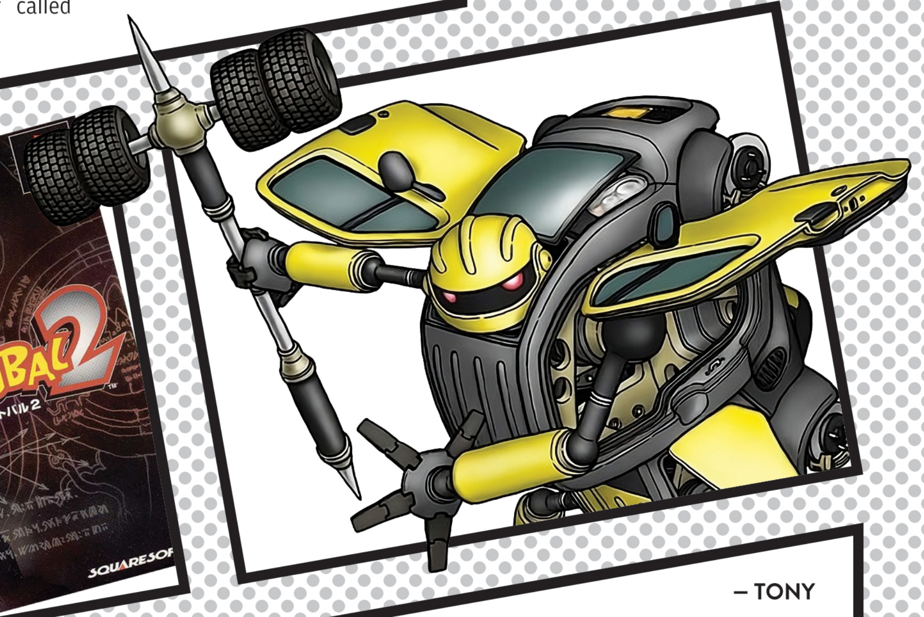
The seminal Dr. Slump remained unknown to the outside world until long after Dragon Ball Z took root, so naturally we were unaware of the Dr. Slump wares available for various pre-Famicom hardware. Likewise in 1999, when Bandai dropped a PS1 title based on the then-current anime reboot (which curiously decided Arale would now be a brunette). Then Dr. Slump: Arale-chan for DS, a proper realization of everything fans loved about the original series, did arrive in 2008, right around when Western fans could more easily access Toriyama's back catalog.

Most of his published works were either one-shots or single-volume runs, yielding little meat for full game adaptations. Yet despite clocking in at a mere 60 pages across 11 chapters from 1993 to 1994, the little-known Go! Go! Ackman spawned a trilogy of Super Famicom action platformers plus a Game Boy maze chase. This dark comedy followed the soul-harvesting exploits of Ackman, a demon child who looks like if Young Trunks had been bitten by a vampire. He's mildly impeded by an angel named Tenshi who, in his attempts to thwart Ackman's murder spree, inadvertently kills the very humans he was trying to save!

More recognizable is 1996's Tobal No. 1, a Square-published PS1 fighter directed by Virtua Fighter and Tekken designer Seiichi Ishii. His mechanical innovations ensured the project found firm footing in the 3D fighting community, though only after Toriyama's original character designs got fans through the door, of course. Tobal further distinguished itself with features like a dungeon crawler quest mode and the mangaka's Robotoriyama avatar (called "Tori" in-game) as an unlockable combatant. Alas, international acclaim wasn't enough to free the 1997 sequel from Japan's borders — a shame, since Tobal 2 cranked the player count from a modest 12 to a disgusting 200 (shockingly, only the *second* largest roster ever in a fighting game)!

Even games not specifically built around Toriyama's distinctive style found ways to incorporate his talents. The 1991 crossover RPG Famicom Jump II: Saikyō no Shichinin featured guest monsters designed by several Shonen Jump mangaka, such as a unicorn cat by the bird man himself. He later gave form to the antagonists in 2019's Jump Force, a more recent Jump celebration. And in Square Enix's 2012 arcade card battler Chōsoku Henkei Gyrozetter, he got to express his love of creating stylized vehicles via a truck-to-beetle transformer called Beeman 500SS. His head pops out of the front windshield!



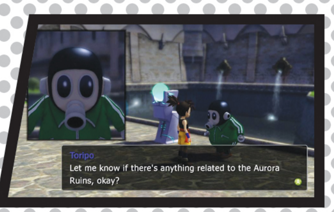


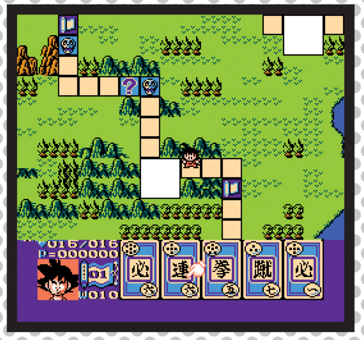
— TONY

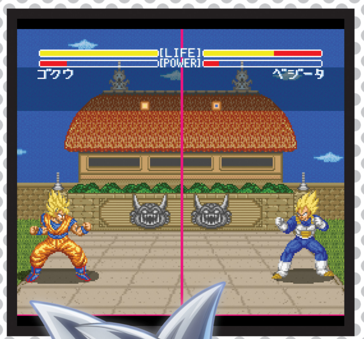
Singing the Blues

XBOX BOMBED IN JAPAN. Microsoft had failed so embarrassingly with their first system there that they made a huge push with their second, recruiting three of the legendary names behind Chrono Trigger to come together again and craft an all-new epic JRPG exclusively for the Xbox 360: Hironobu Sakaguchi, Nobuo Uematsu and, of course, Akira Toriyama. What they came up with, funnily enough, was a *third* brand name for Toriyama-san that had the word "Dragon" in its title.

Blue Dragon was a fairly traditional JRPG – intentionally so, since Microsoft wanted it to be as by-the-numbers as possible to cast the widest possible net – but it did still have a unique visual hook: the Shadows. Kind of like Personas from the Persona series, the Shadows were magical manifestations of the power hidden inside the human heroes, mostly taking the forms of creatures, like a Minotaur, a Phoenix and the titular Blue Dragon. The game didn't sell well enough to really turn Microsoft's fortunes around in Japan, but it did inspire two sequels on the Nintendo DS and an anime adaptation that ran for over 100 episodes! **– LUCAS**







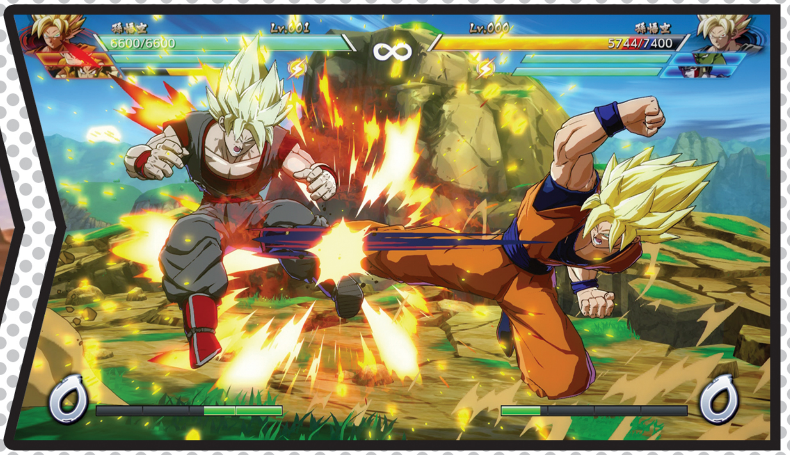
Becoming Son Goku

YOU'D THINK THAT the Dragon Ball series would make an easy transition to the world of gaming. Between the sci-fi and mythological elements, superhero flying, kung fu combat, RPG-style power leveling and the classic "party of heroes on a traveling quest" story loop, it feels like video game logic was baked into the beloved franchise from the start. But it took a long time for Dragon Ball games to become worldwide successes, in part because Dragon Ball and its sequel series Dragon Ball Z struggled to find a break in the United States . . . for decades!

The first officially licensed Dragon Ball game is a now-obscure shmup from 1986, exclusive to the Super Cassette Vision, a console that never left Japan. It was also one of the only Dragon Ball games to go into production before these series got truly big in Asia, so it didn't draw a big-name publisher at the time. Later Dragon Ball titles would be developed and/or published by the likes of Bandai, Atari, Banprestro, Dimps and Infogrames to name a few, which did a lot to help them to harness Toriyama's creative power.

Ironically enough, it was a 1988 game called Dragon Power that sent the series on the wrong track in the USA. (For more on it, check out our Before & After feature on Page 52). The game failed hard, freezing any potential for the next 17 (!) Dragon Ball and Dragon Ball Z games to be released in the States. Games spread across a massive selection of systems including the Famicom, Super Famicom, Game Boy, PC-Engine, Mega Drive — even Bandai's own Playdia — were all locked out from English release.

It took the CD-ROM magic of the PlayStation to turn that around. It got U.S.-localized versions of both Dragon Ball GT: Final Bout in 1997 and Dragon Ball Z: Ultimate Battle 22 in 2003. They weren't massive hits, but unlike Dragon Power, they didn't try to hide what brand they were originally built on: After a decade, Dragon Ball games were finally able to show their true faces around the world!



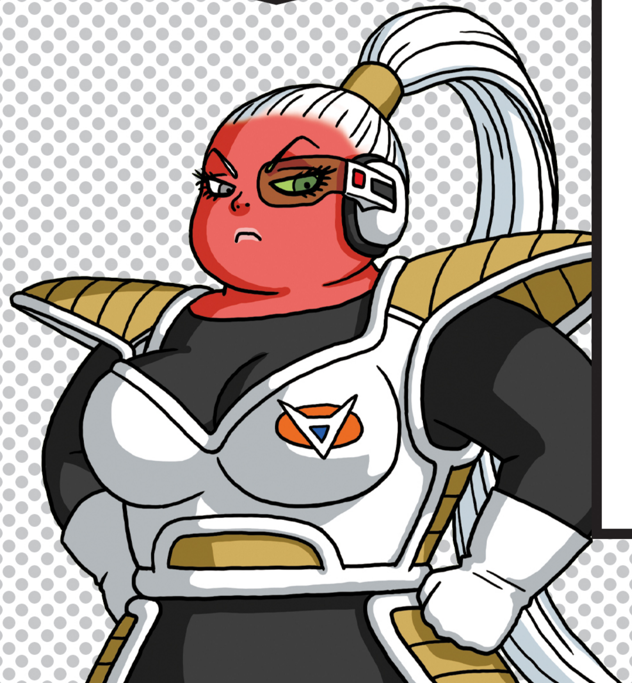
But it wasn't a total win for the franchise. Multiple Dragon Ball and Dragon Ball Z games in the late '90s, for the Super Famicom, Game Boy and Sega Saturn, would again remain unreleased in the U.S. The anime was still on its way to full acceptance here, led by late-night airings of Adult Swim's Toonami lineup. But as the overseas audience for the series grew, so would the overall viability of its games being localized for other territories.

By the time of the release of the Game Boy Advance and PS2, just about every Dragon Ball and Dragon Ball Z game saw worldwide releases. The bulk of them were fighting games, like the Budokai sub-series, with a handful of RPGs and 2D platformers thrown in the mix as well. Dragon Ball dominance then spread ever farther and wider in later console generations: The DS, 3DS, PS3/PS4, GameCube, Wii, Switch and even Xbox all saw their share of successful outings with Goku and company, with the understanding that fans of the manga and anime would always be there to support them.

And in more recent years, any question of whether these games were just riding on the show's coattails or not were put to rest. In the last 15 years, Toriyama-san himself got increasingly involved with the Dragon Ball games. He spent nearly half a decade working on Dragon Ball Online, an MMORPG for South Korea that featured a canonical story set hundreds of years in the future, complete with some all-new characters created by the man himself. He also created two original characters named Shallot and Zahha for a mobile title called Dragon Ball Legends, an all-new boss called Bonyu (seen to the left) for Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot (available on Switch) and a whole new canonical antagonist for Dragon Ball FighterZ (also on Switch), the enigmatically titled Android 21.

It was this last game that arguably cemented the Dragon Ball games as global sensations. In 2023, Bandai Namco announced that both FighterZ and Dragon Ball Xenoverse 2 had sold over 10,000,000 copies each! Two games in entirely different genres (one a fighting game, the other an RPG) based on the same intellectual property, doing those kinds of numbers is largely unheard of. You'd only expect the biggest names in fiction, like Star Wars or Harry Potter, to even try a move like that – but now Dragon Ball has both attempted the maneuver, and pulled it off flawlessly.

Now with over ~~9,000~~ 70 titles produced in all, this series has finally taken its place amongst the globe's most powerful gaming franchises. That's 10 games for each of the seven magic Dragon Balls! I guess wishes really can come true? – **JONATHAN**



Other Games That Honor Toriyama

THERE ARE TOO many Toriyama-influenced video games to count! (In part because so many references still remain unconfirmed.) Street Fighter's Hadokens (first seen in 1987) look a lot like Goku's Kamehameha (first seen in 1985), but Capcom's artists haven't ever acknowledged that fact. And a real-life Ken, Ken Sugimori from the Pokémon series, showed clear signs of Dragon Ball borrowing: Mewtwo has the same tail and color scheme as DBZ villain Frieza, Poké Balls work a lot like Capsule Corp's capsules, and so on.

One less subtle nod comes from Goemon on the N64, whose spikey hair turns a super shade of gold during his Sudden Impact maneuver. Likewise, you can't look at Super Sonic from the titular hedgehog's storied franchise and not see a resemblance to Goku's Super Saiyan form. But the creators of these concepts have never confessed to the connections there, perhaps to prevent potential copyright infringement lawsuits? That said, Sonic Team has copped to a couple of direct ties: The relationship between Sonic and Tails was inspired by Piccolo and Gohan, and the circular title screen logo from Sonic 1 was taken directly from Dr. Slump's Arale. Mario got his signature pre-flight run pose from Arale as well, and in the Splatoon series, the Booyah Bomb special attack is a clear nod to Goku's energy-gathering Spirit Bomb. Who knows where else Toriyama's sparking imagination might be hiding! **– JONATHAN**

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

SAND LAND

Will this grand adaptation of Akira Toriyama's work make it to a Nintendo system?

WHILE IT HASN'T been released on a Nintendo platform (yet), we'd be remiss if we didn't dive into one of the last projects Akira Toriyama worked on before his passing.

Sand Land, a video game adaptation of Toriyama's manga of the same name, was launched on April 26 on PC, PlayStation 4 and 5, and Xbox Series X/S. The manga and game feature a post-apocalyptic tale about the quest for water in a barren wasteland inhabited by humans and demons.

Bandai Namco and ILCA published and developed the game, respectively. According to producer Maxime Meyer, Toriyama-san closely supervised the project along with Japanese publishing company Shueisha.

SWITCH 2? PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: ILCA
RELEASE: TBA 2024? TBA 2025? RATING: T

Since its initial manga release in 2000, the Sand Land IP hadn't seen many updates until 2023, when it received an anime film adaptation. In 2024, it was also adapted into a TV series that ran from March to May on Hulu. These works, along with the game, were the fruits of a partnership between Bandai Namco and Toriyama announced back in 2022.

According to Meyer, Sand Land offers a unique way to experience Toriyama's vibrant worlds.

"There are many different aspects of beauty in the worlds of Toriyama-sensei, and worldviews other than the ones in Dragon Ball, his masterpiece. Sand Land is another work of great value that can show a lot of it," said Meyer.

She added, "We believe that there are people who will be able to deliver this beauty not only through manga and visualizations, but also through games, and we hope that fans will enjoy the unique experience that only games can provide."

SAND LAND'S ORIGIN

After the success of the Dragon Ball and Dragon Ball Z anime, which wrapped up in 1996, Toriyama began working on several short stories in the late '90s and early 2000s. Some of these included Cowa!, Kajika, Neko Majin and Sand Land.

Sand Land's story features a post-apocalyptic desert setting ravaged by war, populated by humans and demons, and ruled by a tyrannical king who hoards water for himself while his subjects struggle to have enough to drink.

A ragtag team assembles to combat the king and his minions – composed of demon prince Beelzebub, his wise demon friend Thief, and former general Sheriff Rao. They work to help provide water to all of those inhabiting the wasteland – and they run into plenty of problems along the way, including stealing a tank from the general!

The narrative comprised 14 chapters bound in one tankobon volume. It released in Japan in 2000 and was localized and released in North America by Viz Media in 2003.

Reviews for the Sand Land manga skewed positive, with praise for Toriyama's clean art style that portrays characters and action scenes well, as well as its simple yet thoughtful story that both kids and adults can enjoy.

Sand Land's creation also gives us a glimpse into Toriyama's creative process and personality, specifically his stubbornness, according to a

message from him in the 2003 North American volume.

"This was supposed to be a short, simple manga about an old man and a tank, which I made for my own personal enjoyment," said Toriyama.

"But the tank was harder to draw than I expected, and I stubbornly insisted on drawing it all myself, so I came to regret ever getting involved with it. But the story was already plotted out to the end, so I couldn't change anything, and I went through hell drawing the whole thing."

SAND LAND: THE GAME

Toriyama may have struggled with illustrating a tank for Sand Land, but in its action RPG adaptation, there is no shortage of vehicles to test out!

This game features a vast open world to explore, where you can craft and drive battletanks, motorbikes and jumpbots to aid in traversal, finding resources and completing different challenges. You can also customize their colors and designs, race them and take them into battle.

The game's narrative and lore follow that of the manga, and players assume the role of Beelzebub, as he and his allies search for a water source known as the Legendary Spring while dealing with enemies from the king's army.

In true RPG fashion, you can customize Beelzebub's abilities to fit your playstyle by unlocking different nodes on a skill tree. Gameplay features real-time combat with him executing magical blasts, throwing rocks, tossing enemies around and more. You can activate these abilities from a radial menu.

Sand Land also has simulation gameplay, where you can customize a basecamp with furniture and other decor, build up the town of Spino with upgrades and develop relationships with different characters you come across in the world.

All of these features stand out even more thanks to Sand Land's beautiful cel-shaded graphics. They're colorful and eye-catching, and the characters are expressive. Toriyama's art has translated well into video games for a long time, but I think Sand Land may be the most ambitious so far in terms of design. Everything you see in-game, from Beelzebub and countless enemy monsters to all the vehicles you could possibly create, have been developed with his signature style in mind.

In reviews, Sand Land received mainly scores in the low 70s. Critics praised its take on the anime-inspired game genre and how it included gameplay elements that others in this category don't always have. It also got high marks for its visuals and combat mechanics, while its open world and story were criticized for lack of depth.

SAND LAND ON SWITCH?

As of the time of printing, Sand Land isn't on Nintendo Switch, nor has it been announced for the console. However, I think there's a good chance it could be due to a few reasons.

First, we could look toward the pattern involving One Piece Odyssey's release (check out our preview on Page 45). That game, also developed and published by ILCA and Bandai Namco respectively, initially released in 2023 on PC, PS4/5 and Xbox Series X/S. This year, it'll receive a Switch port in July!

Since it involves the same developer and publisher and is also a game based on a manga/anime franchise, perhaps Sand Land will follow a similar release schedule, and a port will arrive on the Switch (or a future Nintendo console) sometime in 2025.

Another nugget to consider is Nintendo's history of getting ports to load up their new console's lineup at launch and the months shortly after. Sand Land is poised to be a solid option for that because it didn't launch on Switch initially, and ILCA has had time to work on a possible port.

It's also possible that Sand Land may not land on a Nintendo console at all, since nothing has been confirmed! Maybe Bandai Namco has something bigger planned for the next system — and we have yet to see how One Piece Odyssey's port will perform on Switch.

While it was never intended to be one of Toriyama's last projects, Sand Land's video game adaptation will hold a special place in his legacy for that reason alone. The timing of its release is just one example of how Toriyama's creations will continue to live on after his passing, and I hope more and more people continue to discover his art and stories in the years to come. **— MAGGIE**

DRAGON QUEST III: HD-2D REMAKE

& DRAGON QUEST I & II: HD-2D REMAKE

Relive the entire Erdrick era!

DRAGON QUEST III is the stuff of legend. And not just in the usual "this game was a milestone" sense, but in the fact that it's responsible for one of gaming's oldest urban myths! Its initial Famicom release was an event that led to huge lines of fans waiting for stores to open, with many players even skipping school or taking time off work to enjoy "Dragon Quest Day." As the legend goes, the Japanese government enacted a law which forced Enix to release DQ on Saturdays from then on, to avoid the nation playing collective hooky whenever new games came out. While that's been proven untrue, DQ games have often only come out on Saturdays since (following this game's disruptive Wednesday release).

Whether it changed Japanese law or not, DQIII was a landmark release that warranted the fervor. It was bigger, bolder and more balanced than the first two, boasting an intricate class system and a massive world to explore. The character design really came into its own, with hero Arus perhaps being Akira Toriyama's most iconic human character in the series. There were even male and female versions of every class, and they're all superb designs! Plus, the ambitious Koichi Sugiyama soundtrack hit all the right notes, pulling from a variety of musical modes to complement the world-spanning adventure. But it's the story that's perhaps my favorite part – endearingly episodic, but with a few astounding moments that are made all the more impressive considering the game was first released in 1988.

This upcoming HD-2D Remake had a single trailer back in 2021 but had gone completely silent since then, only finally getting reconfirmed in May. But Nintendo's June 2024 Direct was this beauty's real coming out party, showcasing new visuals that have been given an extra layer of polish, a fully orchestrated soundtrack and a tantalizing release date of November 14.

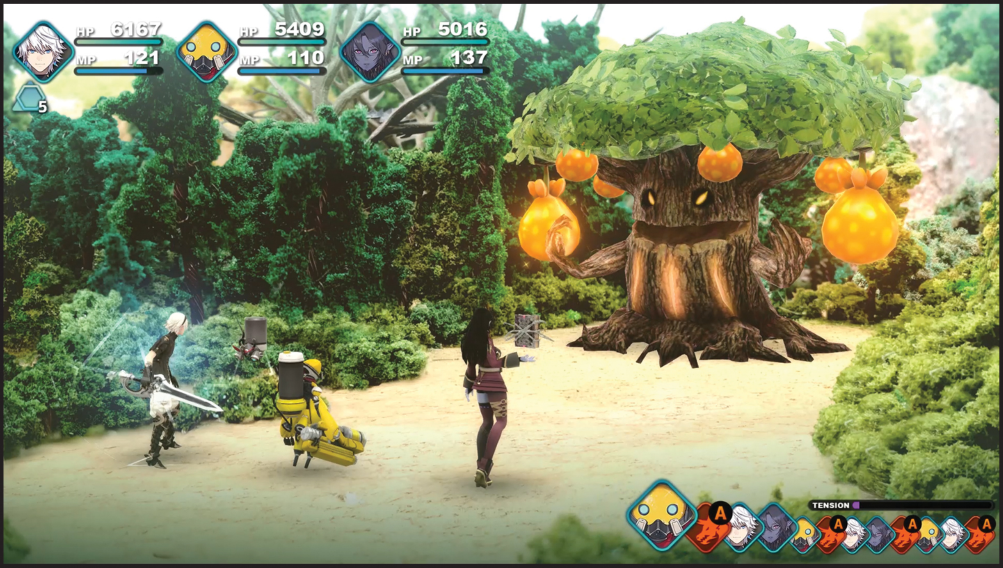
If you're new to Dragon Quest, you may be hesitant about starting with the third game. Don't be! As director Yuji Horii mentioned during the Direct, DQIII is a prequel to the first two and makes an excellent starting point for the series. And I'm inclined to agree, especially since this remake will feature both easier ("Dracky Quest") and harder ("Draconian Quest") modes to suit all players!

Or . . . you could just play the first one! In a welcome surprise reveal, DQIII's newest trailer closed with the bombshell that DQI & DQII are also getting the HD-2D treatment! And like the Game Boy Color port from so long ago, they'll also be packaged together (since both games are a little shorter).

DQI is often seen as the granddaddy of JRPGs due to how it repurposed the complexity of Dungeons & Dragons into something simplified and easy to digest. It's a brief game and only features one playable character, but it was forward-thinking for its time and has a nice sense of open progression. DQII's biggest contributions were its multi-character party and episodic style of storytelling that set the stage for games to come. We don't yet have footage of those two, but we do know they're coming in 2025, so stay tuned!

While it's true that mobile ports of all three games are currently available on the Switch, they suffer from mismatched art and low framerates, and I'd highly recommend waiting for these HD-2D game releases. DQIII in particular is one of my all-time favorite RPGs and a fantastic entry point into the series. So mark your calendar for this year's Dragon Quest Day, November 14! (It's a Thursday this time.) **— MATTHEW T.**

SWITCH **PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER:** SQUARE ENIX **RELEASE:** NOVEMBER 14, 2024 (III); TBA 2025 (I&II) **RATING:** E



SWITCH PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: MISTWALKER RELEASE: WINTER 2024 RATING: RP

FANTASIAN: NEO DIMENSION

Featuring one of Toriyama's most under-the-radar contributions!

IT'S ALWAYS A treat when a beloved video game becomes easier to access. So RPG fans collectively rejoiced at the June Nintendo Direct when Fantasian: Neo Dimension was announced to finally be coming to consoles!

Originally released as simply "Fantasian" in 2021 as an Apple Arcade exclusive, this RPG from Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi and his studio Mistwalker will arrive on the Switch this Winter. Final Fantasy composer Nobuo Uematsu also crafted the music for this game.

After its initial release, Fantasian received rave reviews, and fans clamored for it to expand beyond mobile gaming platforms. It took three years, but Fantasian: Neo Dimension looks to offer an RPG experience that will be worth the wait.

The inspiration for Fantasian came around six years ago, when Sakaguchi replayed Final Fantasy VI alongside other devs who had worked on it, according to an interview with Video Games Chronicle.

"That reminded me how much I really like this classic RPG genre, if you will, and from there it really brought me back to my roots and gave me this desire to make a game like that," he said.

Fantasian has some callbacks to old-school RPGs including an amnesiac hero, random encounters and a turn-based combat system with traditional elements like physical attacks, item usage and magical abilities.

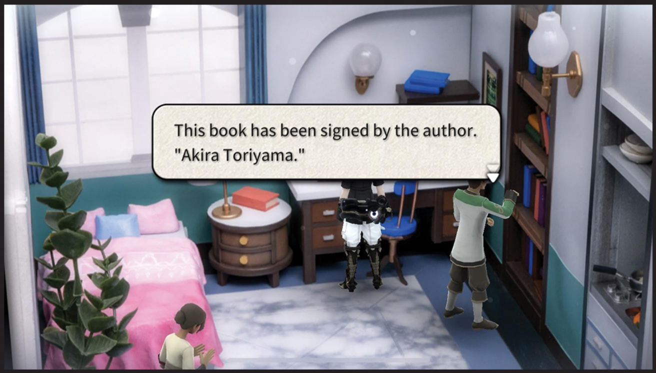
It also features the intriguing Dimengeon System, where, as you encounter monsters, you can delay fighting them by casting them into a different dimension.

Eventually, you'll have to face them – either when your Dimengeon Meter fills up or if you choose to fight before that happens. Taking on these rescheduled enemies all at once could reduce the grind and provide a bigger challenge at the same time. The combat system also conveniently allows you to position your attacks in straight or curved lines, so you can hit several enemies at once.

Another unique feature are the game's intricate environments, which were created using more than 150 real-life hand-crafted dioramas. They scanned and photographed these dioramas, so they could be rendered in-game and serve as Fantasian's many dimensions.

In fact, one of the game's dioramas was crafted by Akira Toriyama after he entered a contest under a pseudonym, according to a 2021 Famitsu interview with Sakaguchi. Toriyama also has cameo in Fantasian as an NPC you can encounter. Sakaguchi and Toriyama previously worked together on Blue Dragon and Chrono Trigger.

Fantasian: Neo Dimension will deliver something old and something new when it comes to RPG experiences, and its upcoming Switch port should entice established fans and newcomers as well! **– MAGGIE**



THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS THROUGH DAYBREAK

A new combat system debuts in the Trails saga's latest chapter.

EVERY TRAILS ARC comes with its own set of updates, but Trails through Daybreak may provide the biggest breath of fresh air this series has ever had.

Nihon Falcom's long-running Trails franchise features an interconnected series of JRPGs that take place on the continent of Zemuria. Each arc within the series focuses on a different main cast, a different nation and a different piece of the overall story.

Trails through Daybreak is the latest in the series to come West. It will arrive July 5 on Switch.

Daybreak includes several big changes for the series. It takes place in the Calvard Republic, a nation that's come into play in previous games but never featured as the main setting. It solely follows the perspective of an older and more morally grey protagonist, Van Arkride, and it employs a hybrid action and turn-based combat system.

Calvard is a more technologically advanced and diverse nation than we've seen so far in the series, which leads to some interesting developments in character backstories and lore.

Van is a nice change of pace when it comes to Trails protagonists. (Most of them have been the traditional morally good hero types.) He runs Arkride Solutions Office, a business that assists people when they aren't able to utilize the authorities. Van doesn't mind skirting the law to help his clients – and he's definitely got his own demons to deal with.

Previous Trails games featured the series' turn-based AT Battle System, and Daybreak adds an action component to the mix! This hybrid system allows you to easily transition between action and turn-based modes.

The action combat is quite simple. You have a basic attack, a charged attack and dodging, but it's nice when you want to cut through trash mobs.

The turn-based mode has all the key pieces of AT Battles: character-specific attacks called Crafts and elemental Arts, which are acquired by equipping Quartz. It's utilized in boss fights and can be activated in the field whenever you choose.

Daybreak adds a new mechanic: Shards. As you customize loadouts with Quartz, party members will gain access to Shard Skills that grant benefits like adding elemental damage to basic attacks, etc.

Daybreak will forge a new path within the Trails series. It's set to provide a refreshing experience to old fans and a journey that new fans can jump right into! (And if you want to jump right into it yourself, there's a free demo available in the Switch eShop now.) – **MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RELEASE: JULY 5, 2024 RATING: T

ONE PIECE ODYSSEY

After debuting on competing platforms last year, Luffy's latest is hitting the Switch.

AS ONE OF the longest-running anime series to date, One Piece has crossed over into the world of video games many times since its inception. In fact, the series' first game — a strategy RPG subtitled "Become the Pirate King!" — was released nearly 24 years ago!

Now, after more than 50 games and over 1,100 anime episodes later, another One Piece RPG will soon set sail. One Piece Odyssey will arrive on the Switch on July 26, after previously releasing on PS4/5, Xbox Series S/X and PC early last year.

If you're not familiar with this series, the One Piece franchise by Eiichiro Oda features protagonist Monkey D. Luffy and the Straw Hat Pirates as they journey the seas in search of the famous treasure known as One Piece. Luffy and his crew each have their own talents and reasons for choosing a pirate's life, and the story of their exploits has been going strong since 1997.

One Piece Odyssey was developed in honor of the series' 25th anniversary, and its premise and mechanics make it feel like a love letter to longtime fans of the series.

The game presents a new story, with Luffy and co. getting shipwrecked and stranded on a deserted island called Waford. Luffy must find his scattered crew and help them recover their powers, and this provides a heavy dose of nostalgia.

To regain their powers, the crew must dive into their own memories, relive some of One Piece's most beloved moments throughout different arcs and see new possibilities that diverge from the series' canon story.

It sounds like a pretty cool concept . . . but could also create a barrier to entry for players who may not be up-to-date on the series (or have not read or watched the series at all).

Gameplaywise, One Piece Odyssey has your typical RPG fare, from dungeon crawling and turn-based combat to a plethora of sidequests and field exploration sequences.

In combat, you control up to four members of the Straw Hat Pirates and use basic or special attacks and items against a variety of monsters. The goal is to build up Tension Points by pinpointing enemy weaknesses and then using that TP to activate skills.

Alongside Luffy, crew members Zoro, Nami, Usopp, Sanji, Chopper, Robin, Franky and Brook join the fray. They each have special abilities they can use in battle and in exploration.

One Piece Odyssey has the makings of a solid RPG experience, but I could see it being tough for newcomers to gain their sea legs in this game without background knowledge. (And 1,100+ episodes is a huge ask for a binge to get caught up.) For longtime fans though, this one is made just for you. Anchors aweigh! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: ILCA RELEASE: JULY 26, 2024 RATING: T

HADES II

Play is under way with Steam Early Access!

CRAFTING A SEQUEL that lives up to the sky-high standard set by Hades is a challenging endeavor. Supergiant's Hades II, though, seems to be rising to that challenge! It recently launched as an Early Access title on Steam, and the overwhelming majority of people who have played it have praised it – but they've also provided critical feedback that Supergiant has already acted on with some recent updates.

Since the game's reveal, we've known it stars Melinoë – she's Hades' daughter (also making her Zagreus' sister), and the Titan of Time, Chronos (who is also her grandfather) has kid-napped her dear old Dad of the Dead. She's on a mission to rescue him, striking out from a base of operations called the Crossroads: a place between the surface and the underworld.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SUPERGIANT GAMES
RELEASE: TBA RATING: T

Instead of a more linear run like Zagreus' climb out of the underworld, Melinoë must choose to either head down into the underworld to battle Chronos himself in Tartarus, or set out for the surface above to take on his armies. One road leads to buffs and resources, while the other leads to the final confrontation. (Both lead to death and starting over again.)

The Crossroads is also where Mel can interact with several characters to advance subplots or buy upgrades for her next run. The gallery of gods is here again too, ready to lend their random boons to Mel and her quests. The level of storytelling in the original had such depth, and players are once more engrossed in the new narrative and love the new characters. Arachne the spider is already a fan fave – she provides Mel with new armors. Heroic Odysseus helps Melinoë strategize for battles, while Dora the Shade haunts Mel's room and provides comic relief.

A favorite from the first game, Skelly, now refers to himself as "Commander Schelemeus" (and still helps with training). Selene, Goddess of the Moon, gives Mel new hexes. Once again, the voice acting for all of these characters is stellar – that has become a Supergiant trademark.

Mel's attack style is something all players are mentioning, as it differs greatly from Zag's dash-and-strike method players needed to perfect to reach his endgame. Mel can dash, but it's shorter and works differently than the dash from the previous game. She relies more on sprinting, and while it's unlimited, it slows things down a bit and allows for more strategy. Mel is also a witch – she can create sigils with AoE damage and lure enemies to them – but she has limited magic power to work with. And there are new weapons to buy. And Arcana Cards! And . . . well, there's a lot that's new here.

Right now, the plan is to keep Hades II in Early Access for the rest of 2024 to balance all those additions, and add more content. With so much content already, it's hard to believe there'll be more, but we welcome it. More is what we're here for! **– BRETT**

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SPLINTERED FATE

Hades meets the Heroes in a Half-Shell.

IF YOU'RE HAVING a hankering for more Hades but don't want to jump over to Steam to experience the direct sequel while it's in Early Access, you could await its inevitable arrival on the Nintendo side of the industry by playing this cool, capable clone.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Splintered Fate first debuted as an Apple Arcade exclusive a little over a year ago. At the time, reviewers of that original version remarked that it was an incredibly "console-like" game, somewhat unsuited for buttonless, touchscreen-only Apple hardware. But Apple must've scored a deal with the developers at Super Evil Megacorp, as it stayed locked away on iPhones and iPads throughout 2023, and only reached a limited audience as a result.

With its July arrival on the Switch, though, a much wider audience is just about to get their hands on this great game. Actual hands – gripping actual controllers with real, tangible buttons! (Touchscreen-only gaming can be great; I'm not disparaging all titles made for those devices. But a fast, frenetic roguelike like this is really going to be so much better served by being on a more traditional machine.)

Splintered Fate's elevator pitch is simple: Take Hades, mash it up with the TMNT franchise and multiply its playable characters by a factor of four. Hades had different playable *weapons* instead of characters – Zagreus would play totally differently while wielding a spear versus a shield versus a bow, and so on – so picture if four separate Zags, each wielding one of those different weapons, charged out of the underworld as a team. That's hitting close to the vibe we'll get with four players tackling this one together: Leo with his katanas, Donnie with his bo, Mikey with his nunchuks and Raph, as always, cutting fools down with sais.

Progression will be Hades-like as well, with early runs almost certain to end in failure – but you'll gather coins and upgrades to your stats over time, such that you'll be better prepared to succeed with each subsequent run you set out on. Ultimately, you'll be able to find and rescue Master Splinter!

This game offers a fusion of one of my favorite brands and one of my favorite games from recent years. I'm excited to dive into it! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SUPER EVIL MEGACORP DEVELOPERS: SUPER EVIL MEGACORP & PARAMOUNT GAME STUDIOS RELEASE: JULY 17, 2024 RATING: E10+

NINTENDO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS: NES EDITION

Revisiting the Nintendo Entertainment System once more (by way of Wii U).

NES REMIX IS getting remixed itself.

As we're nearing the end of the Switch life cycle and looking toward the beginning of Nintendo's next hardware generation, the long line of "Wii U to Switch" ports is also coming to an end. In the earliest days of the Switch, Nintendo went back to the well of the Wii U library repeatedly, selling quickly made ports to supplement the new system's (at the time) thin lineup. (It proved to be a good move in almost every case, as some of those Wii U encores, like Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, have gone on to sell absolutely insane numbers of copies after having been given that second chance.) Then the ports dropped off for a while – new, original game development had gotten up to speed and Nintendo didn't need the release schedule fillers anymore. But now, in the system's waning days and with the Switch release slate looking thin again as Nintendo's devs have mostly moved on to preparing launch software for the Switch 2, we are once again getting a Wii U encore.

This time, NES Remix is up to bat. Originally released in 2013, the game brought together 16 different classic titles from the 8-bit era and tasked players to take on bite-sized trials in each of them, like quickly clearing one stage or nabbing a single power-up.

The full games were not included – just snippets of their gameplay. A little highlight reel of each title, basically. Making matters worse was the fact that most of the inclusions were early, launch-era NES titles like Tennis, Ice Climber and Clu Clu Land. Players wanted to see more of the later-gen 8-bit games, like Kirby's Adventure!

Well, a few months later, in early 2014, that wish was granted (kind of). NES Remix 2 launched, and it had a dozen new games, like Kirby, in it.

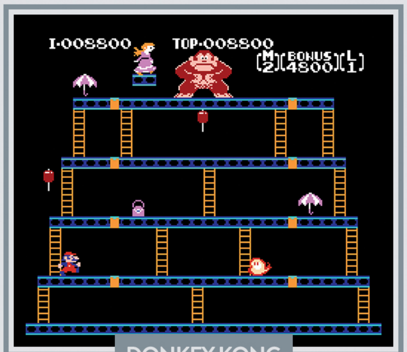
Splitting the content into two titles released only a few months apart seemed like a bad call at the time – but compared to what we're about to be offered, that old roster looks great! Because the new Nintendo World Championships: NES Edition takes the combined 28 games from the two NES Remix Wii U compilations and chops it all the way down to just 13. Ouch.

There are some aspects of this re-launch to be excited about. NES Remix never had multiplayer, but now on the Switch you can have up to eight pals go head-to-head – that's something. New online leaderboards could extend the appeal of these challenges too, especially with how big speedrunning has gotten in the past decade.

But mostly this game just feels like a release calendar filler. Its branding is also odd: The World Championships were huge spectacles! In-person tournaments pitting hundreds of Nintendo-obsessed kids against one another to fight for glory. Now Nintendo is saying you can have that same fun "in your living room!" I mean, no? Not at all? Selling this game this way makes about as much sense as when they brought back the Nintendo Power name, but used it for a podcast. What a weird marketing idea. **– LUCAS**

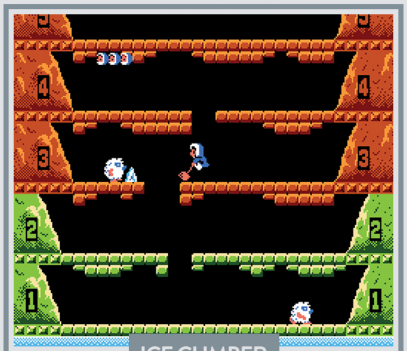
SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & INDIESZERO RELEASE: JULY 18, 2024 RATING: E

BALLOON FIGHT



DONKEY KONG

EXCITEBIKE



ICE CLIMBER

A SLIM SELECTION

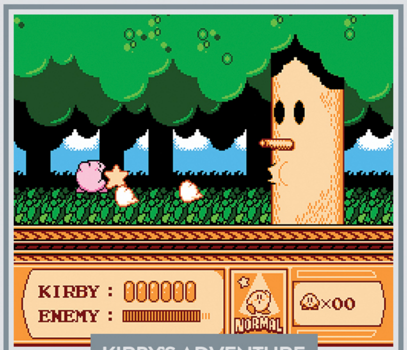
13 NES CLASSICS

Listen, I'm a card-carrying, founding member of the Ice Climber fan club, but I'm honest enough to admit that it isn't one of the best possible picks if you're trying to cull Nintendo's first-party NES lineup down to just 13 games. And Balloon Fight? And Excitebike? And the NES version of Donkey Kong?! Again, I adore all of these titles as a nostalgic child of the '80s, but those are all pretty content-thin. You're not getting a lot of bang for your buck by carving quickfire trials out of any of those four.

The remaining nine choices here are at least all full adventures, and as such will have many more moments to isolate from their full runs and turn into speedrunning challenges of a few seconds each. And every one of these games is available to play in its entirety through Nintendo Switch Online, which is nicer than how NES Remix treated players who got inspired to want to try the full games. (It just gave them links to the Wii U eShop where they were all on sale for five bucks each.)

But still, *13* games total? Deliberately removing the 15 others that were in NES Remix 1 and 2? What is that about? If Nintendo really wanted to wow us with this reheated serving of leftovers pulled from the back of the nearly cleared-out Wii U fridge, they should've brought back all 28 titles from the Remix games, then added more beyond those. And it looks like the titular Remix modes, which let you do fun things like play as Link in Super Mario Bros., might have gotten the ax too? The outlook's not good here.

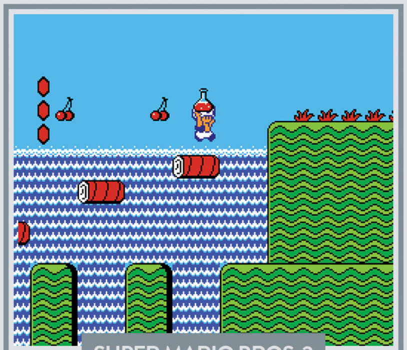
KID ICARUS



KIRBY'S ADVENTURE

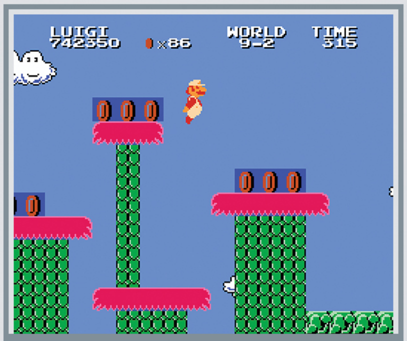
METROID

SUPER MARIO BROS.



SUPER MARIO BROS. 2

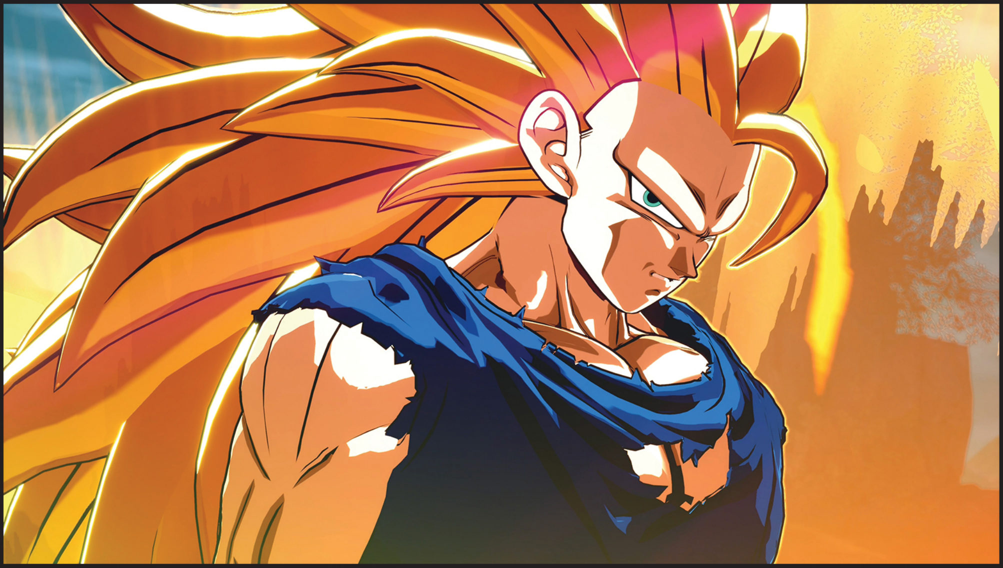
SUPER MARIO BROS. 3



SUPER MARIO BROS. THE LOST LEVELS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

ZELDA II: THE ADVENTURE OF LINK



DRAGON BALL: SPARKING! ZERO

Another Toriyama title that may or may not make its way to Nintendo.

SWITCH 2? PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT RELEASE: TBA 2024? TBA 2025? RATING: T

AS DRAGON BALL mania truly began to spread in the West throughout the 2000s, fans were treated to two distinct DBZ fighting game subseries. The Dimps-designed Budokai brand was geared toward the more traditional pugilists, while the Spike-developed Budokai Tenkaichi series scratched the itch of those who favored high-flying, 3D arena battles. Both had their cheerleaders, though fans of the latter seemed to sing its praises just a little bit louder.

Well, get ready to crown a new strongest under the heavens, as Bandai Namco recently unveiled a fresh Budokai Tenkaichi installment, now under the original Japanese "Sparking!" banner. Also altered from earlier entries is the absence of the "Z" branding, likely to better stress the importance of every Dragon Ball era, from the early mystical adventure days to the current Super run.

But before we break out the party poppers, let's address the Shenron in the sky . . .

Dragon Ball: Sparking! Zero is currently targeting a 2024 release on all platforms . . . except Switch. But this is Bamco! We know their dumb game! Ever since Xenoverse 2's late Switch port – understandable, as the game's original release predated the launch of Nintendo's then-newest hardware – they've had a fairly nasty habit of withholding Nintendo builds for up to a year or longer. They did it with FighterZ, then again with Kakarot. Maybe this double-dip strategy leads to increased sales, but from a consumer perspective, it's annoying.

So until the *inevitable* Switch 2 announcement, we can speculate on what's sure to be an impressive roster. Budokai Tenkaichi is famous for its enormous cast – as a reminder, the third entry sported a whopping 162 fighters including transformations – and the larger the cast, the deeper the cuts! Aside from the Gokus and Vegetas, we also had rarely represented movie villains like Garlic Jr., Dr. Wheelo and Hirudegarn, plus Red Ribbon O.G.s like General Blue and Mercenary Tao. Heck, we also got Frieza's minion Appule – *APPULE!* – whose big series standout was getting unalived by Vegeta while the prince was still healing in a recovery tank!

So far in Zero, newcomers from the Super era include Beerus and Whis, as well a horde of Tournament of Power participants: the Universe 6 Saiyans Caulifla, Kale and their fusion form Kefla; Jiren, Toppo and Dyspo of the Universe 11 Pride Troopers; Kakunsa of the Universe 2 Kamikaze Fireballs; and Bergamo of the Universe 9 Trio of Danger. Already, we can see a mix of expected and unexpected characters . . . but I think we can dive deeper!

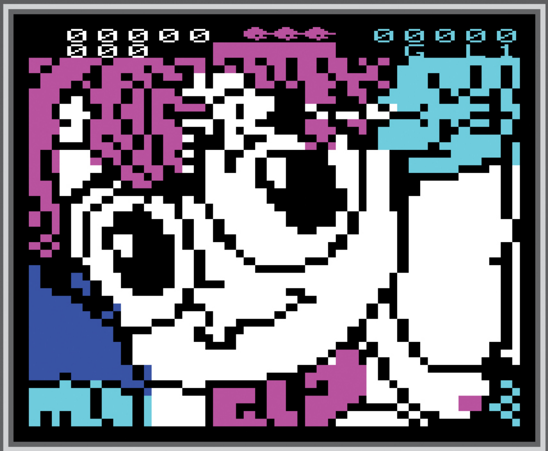
One source these games have yet to tap is the Super manga. So many wild new designs ripe for the plucking! Why leave them on the vine? Bring on Moro, Merus, the Heeters or even random criminals from the Galactic Prison! And I wanna see high schooler Mai dripped out in her prom night combat armor, *let's gooooo!* – **TONY**

RETRO

EXPLORING PICTURESQUE PENGUIN VILLAGE

DR. SLUMP
BANDAI ARCADIA, 1983

It's uncanny how well they captured the look of Akira Toriyama's artwork, wouldn't you agree? Arale-chan is running around Penguin Village, just like a Dr. Slump manga page come to life! . . . Well, OK, so the home console technology of the early '80s wasn't quite a perfect match for adapting intricate art, but the developers of that era did the best they could working under severe hardware limitations. I'm just impressed that Akira Toriyama's career began so far back into the past that the first video games based on his work pre-dated even the release of the Famicom in Japan! He was pre-Nintendo! Once the Big N began to sell their own home system, though, it got plenty of Toriyama titles of its own. (Though none of those were based on Dr. Slump!) — **LUCAS**



BEFORE & AFTER

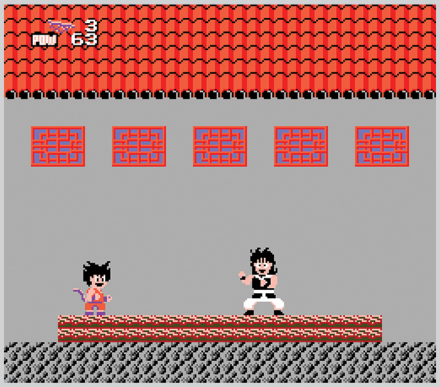
DRAGON BALL: SHENRON NO NAZO & DRAGON POWER

Remembering the time Bandai decided to scrub Toriyama out of a whole game.

VIDEO GAMES BASED on the Dragon Ball universe are incredibly commonplace today. Dragon Ball itself, though, is actually a lot older than many fans realize, with the original anime series debuting in 1986, and the manga it was based on dating all the way back to 1984! As such, Dragon Ball video games are almost as old as Nintendo consoles themselves, with the very first game based on the license, Dragon Ball: Dragon Daihikyō, releasing on Epoch's ill-fated Super Cassette Vision.

Dragon Ball's second game, though, showed up just a few months later in the form of Dragon Ball: Shenron no Nazo for Nintendo's Famicom, courtesy of Tose and Bandai. Like most Famicom games based on anime licenses back then, it was pretty popular in Japan, but when it came time to bring it to the NES, the result was almost unrecognizable.

With the Dragon Ball license all but unknown in the U.S., Bandai took a ton of liberties with its localization in an effort to make it more appealing to American audiences. The name of the game was changed to Dragon Power, and Toriyama's colorful artwork was replaced on the game's box with a generic white gi-clad karate dude.



In the game itself, though, you still play as a young boy dressed in bright orange named Goku – but he's been redesigned to look more like a monkey, with his signature hairstyle gone and his chibi face completely rearranged. And that's just the beginning! Bulma was renamed Nora, Master Roshi was changed into a blue-robed hermit (who wants Nora's sandwiches instead of Bulma's underwear), Oolong was called Pudgy and even the Dragon Balls themselves were changed into Crystal Balls. How boring!

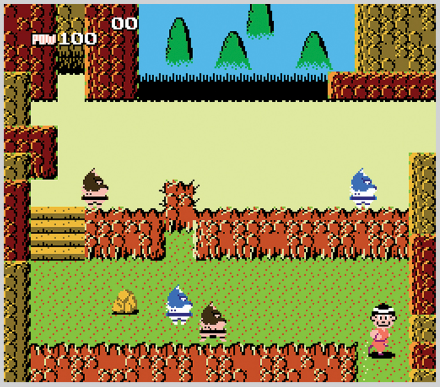
The game's musical score suffered a tragic downgrade too. Whereas the Famicom game featured some pretty neat renditions of the anime series' tunes, the North American game removed all of that in favor of some frankly uninspired fare.

You might think from reading this that us poor North American gamers were robbed of an early introduction to Dragon Ball thanks to these bizarre alterations, but sadly, nothing could be further from the truth: No matter which region you were in, this game played absolutely dreadfully! Every aspect of the experience – the controls, the hit detection, honestly everything – is completely uninspired and, at times, borderline broken. Goku's attacks are limited to a simple punch, though he can find his Power Pole as a power-up for a short time. Players can also eventually learn the Kamehameha (called the Wind Wave in Dragon Power), but its usefulness is depressingly limited.

The game does manage to more or less follow the plot of the original series: Goku faces off against a Desert Bandit, fights a rabbit on the moon, battles an evil army, competes in a martial arts tournament and plenty more, but very little of it is in any way enjoyable.

It's a shame Dragon Power is more interesting than it is good, because its lineage is a fascinating story. Dragon Power is an interesting curiosity, but little more.

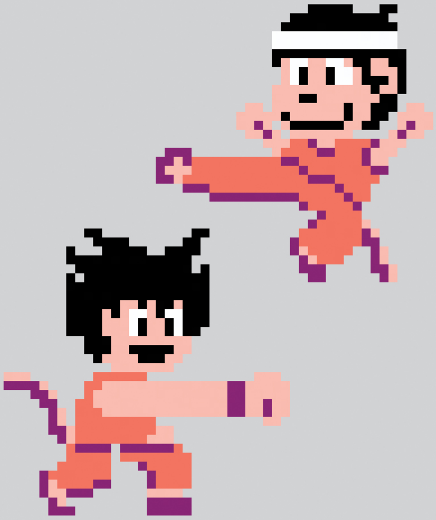
Still, it's fun to look back on it now and wonder, could the game have performed better had they left Toriyama's art unchanged? I guess we'll never know.
– KRIS



ORIGINAL RELEASE: FAMICOM, NOVEMBER 1986; NES, MARCH 1988
PUBLISHER: BANDAI **DEVELOPER:** TOSE

PLAYING IT TODAY

You're probably not too desperate to get your hands on a copy of Dragon Power after reading that assessment of its merit, but if you are, loose cartridges can be claimed via eBay for as low as a few bucks (plus shipping). It has never been resold in any more modern format. But Shenron no Nazo has! It was included as an unlockable in the Japanese version of Dragon Ball Origins 2 on DS in 2010, and was also included in the shiny, Japan-exclusive Famicom Mini Weekly Shōnen Jump 50th Anniversary Version, which was a gold-painted re-release of the Famicom Mini that went on sale in 2018 and was also loaded up with other manga- and anime-inspired video games from the 8-bit era.



ORIGINAL RELEASE: SUPER FAMICOM, SEPTEMBER 19, 1993
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CHUNSOFT

PLAYING IT TODAY

Your best bet is a fan translation: There are multiple available, with the first having been released 20 years ago. In terms of an official re-release, there isn't one currently, nor has one been announced. But it's not impossible! Chunsoft and Square Enix still work closely together, and the game is a beloved one. Even a localized release is possible, as a PAL prototype has been found with a supposedly complete English translation. With no licensing issues and a completed translation, we could see it in the West one day. You could also check out its sequel, Torneko: The Last Hope, which did get an English release on PS1 in 2000!

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION
TORNEKO NO DAIBŌKEN: FUSHIGI NO DUNGEON

The first time one of Akira Toriyama's Dragon Quest heroes got their own spin-off!

DRAGON QUEST IV marked an early turning point in its series: It's when the characters began to actually have developed personalities. Before then, they were essentially just blank faces there to fill roles in your party (if there was a party at all). Among DQIV's first wave of actual heroes was Torneko – or, as he was known in the North American version, Taloon. Rather than a self-righteous warrior, he was a shopkeeper with a love of treasure hunting and a family waiting at home. The early moments of the game – where you dined on a slice of his life by simply running a shop – were some of the most memorable, even though they served as only a brief diversion in a long, epic adventure.

After the completion of Dragon Quest V, Chunsoft decided to pursue other avenues, and among them was making a dungeon crawler in a similar format to the 1980 classic, Rogue. (This was well before the term "roguelike" had really caught on and long before the genre exploded.) To do this, they turned to Torneko. His love of treasure and desire to have a gloriously stocked shop to support his family gave him the perfect motivation to plumb the depths of an endless dungeon.

The result was Torneko no Daibōken: Fushigi no Dungeon, which translates roughly to Torneko's Great Adventure: Mystery Dungeon. If that sounds somewhat familiar, that's because it's the first game of Chunsoft's long-running Mystery Dungeon series! It would be followed by Mystery Dungeon 2: Shiren the Wanderer (which inspired a sub-series of its own) and crossovers with the Final Fantasy and Pokémon brands.

Here, Torneko and his family travel to a distant kingdom in search of the titular mysterious dungeon. However, before you're allowed to enter the endless dungeon, the king challenges Torneko with a trial: You have to enter a training dungeon, descend 10 floors and return with a jewelry box. This is no small feat! While the initial dungeon lacks some of the difficult enemy types, getting to the final floor takes determination.

The dungeons are randomly generated, and movement is done on a tile-by-tile basis. While it may look similar to The Legend of Zelda, Torneko no Daibōken is actually turn-based. Each action (aside from pivoting in place) counts as a turn, with enemies moving simultaneously. This means that if you're not moving, neither is the game. The result is a pretty meditative experience, where you're allowed to stop and consider your actions. Is it smart to thwap the robed enemy while they're not looking, or would it be better to hit them with an arrow from across the room, buying you precious turns before they retaliate?

Like most roguelikes, all your gear and levels are lost between runs. Permanent progression is gained by collecting enough gold to upgrade your shop and help the town grow. Eventually, you can store gathered items and choose what to take out with you on later runs.

The back of the box refers to it as the RPG that can be played "1,000 times," which is technically true, but it probably won't take you that long to finish it. However, it's a charming way to describe its randomly generated dungeons. The item you're after starts appearing after 25 floors, but after the main quest, you're challenged to continue going deeper, all the way down to Level 99.

Like all the games in the Dragon Quest series, Akira Toriyama contributed character designs to this one, helping add extra angles to his classic monsters. The series won't be the same without him! **– ZOEY**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE 122ND ISSUE of Nintendo Power magazine for July 1999 featured World Driver Championship on the cover. The seven pages of tips for its tricky tracks were joined by a preview of Konami's Hybrid Heaven, Quake III, Star Wars Episode I: Racer (which shared a poster with WWF Attitude), Command & Conquer, Shadow Man, The New Tetris, Rugrats: Scavenger Hunt and Mario Golf! Yahoo!

If you were more about playing with Portable Power (of the Color persuasion), Nintendo had you covered, as the rejuvenated handheld had more hits (citation needed) like Ken Griffey Jr.'s Slugfest, Duke Nukem and Pokémon Pinball. Gotta tilt 'em all!

Other features sprinkled throughout the mag included "Power's Virtual E3," where you could browse the booths and view the games that made headlines at the big show in Los Angeles. Hey, this was well before YouTube, and as close to the show floor as most of us were ever going to get! And with news like a press conference revealing "Codename Dolphin" (better known now as the "GameCube"), we were glad to get it.

On a related note, the grand prize winner of this issue's Player's Poll contest won *all* the games shown in Nintendo's E3 booth that year, sent out as they were released. That was 30 Nintendo 64 games and 15 Game Boy Color games, including such bangers as Donkey Kong 64, Perfect Dark, Pokémon Snap, Pokémon Stadium, Resident Evil 2, Super Smash Bros., Bionic Commando, Pokémon Pinball, Pokémon Yellow, Super Mario Bros. Deluxe and WWF Attitude – quite a haul!

Speaking of Pokémon (as most people at the time were), this issue's PokéCenter feature included an interview with Tsunekazu Ishihara, the President of Creatures Inc. It was an early chat with the man who's still holding that same role 25 years later!

Closing things out in Pak Watch were peeks at Perfect Dark, Rayman, and everybody's favorite, Gex, in Gex 3: Deep Cover Gecko! Plus, despite all the WWF Attitude running wild in these issues, there was word that the Federation's time with Acclaim was over, as the 10-year relationship that began all the way back in 1989 with Rare's WWF WrestleMania for the NES was coming to a close. The rights would transfer to THQ – heralding the coming of some of the most legendary titles in the brand's history that some people still talk about to this day.

The aforementioned Hybrid Heaven claimed the cover of August's Issue #123, joined inside by "N-depth" coverage of WWF Attitude, Gex 3, World Driver Championship (which shared the poster with EA Sports Supercross 2000), Bass Hunter 64, Army Men: Sarge's Heroes, Duke Nukem: Zero Hour, Command & Conquer, LEGO Racer, Monster Truck Madness 64 and Mario Golf.

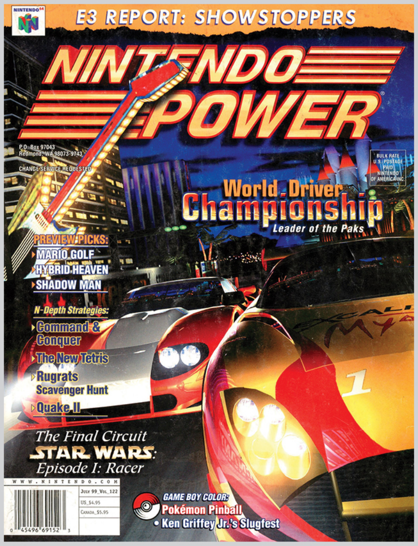
Game Boy Color coverage was for Spawn. Just Spawn. Think about that for a while.

Speaking of Mario Golf, NP held "The Nintendo Power Invitational," whose grand prize winner took home a Mario trophy, a Game Boy Color and the GBC version of Mario Golf. And speaking of Monster Truck Madness 64, this month's Player's Poll winner received a real Ford F-150, customized by the Bigfoot monster truck team. Unlike the big guy, though, this one was street legal.

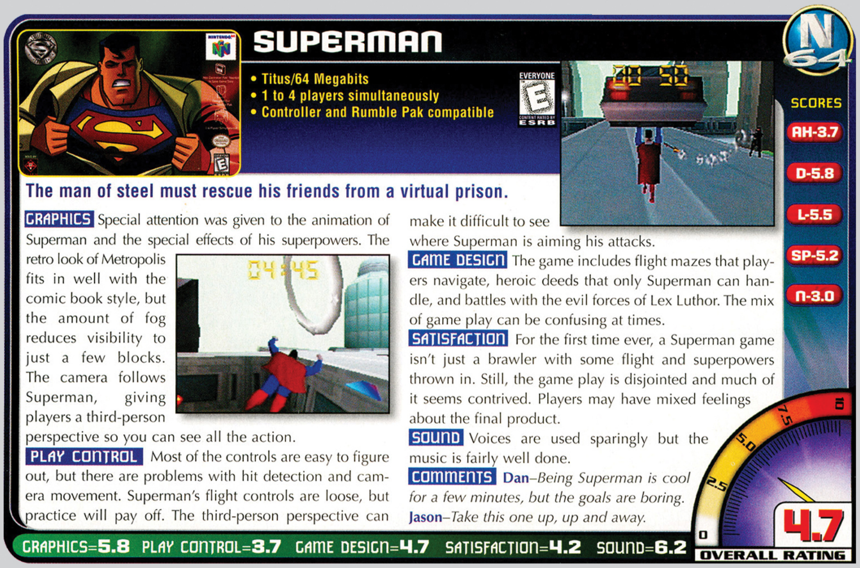
A new PokéCenter brought news of the movie, Mewtwo Strikes Back, the Pokémon League Summer Training Tour '99 and a whopping 16 pages of screencap comics from the seventh anime episode, "The Water Flowers of Cerulean City." There was also a Pokémon Snap sticker album, to be used in tandem with the Pokémon Snap Stations found at Blockbuster Video.

Finally, in Pak Watch, we got Jet Force Gemini, Ridge Racer, and tastes of games we'd never see in the States, such as Doshin the Giant. **– DAVID**

ISSUE #122: **JULY 1999**



ISSUE #123: **AUGUST 1999**



SUPERMAN

- Titus/64 Megabits
- 1 to 4 players simultaneously
- Controller and Rumble Pak compatible

The man of steel must rescue his friends from a virtual prison.

GRAPHICS Special attention was given to the animation of Superman and the special effects of his superpowers. The retro look of Metropolis fits in well with the comic book style, but the amount of fog reduces visibility to just a few blocks. The camera follows Superman, giving players a third-person perspective so you can see all the action.

PLAY CONTROL Most of the controls are easy to figure out, but there are problems with hit detection and camera movement. Superman's flight controls are loose, but practice will pay off. The third-person perspective can make it difficult to see where Superman is aiming his attacks.

GAME DESIGN The game includes flight mazes that players navigate, heroic deeds that only Superman can handle, and battles with the evil forces of Lex Luthor. The mix of game play can be confusing at times.

SATISFACTION For the first time ever, a Superman game isn't just a brawler with some flight and superpowers thrown in. Still, the game play is disjointed and much of it seems contrived. Players may have mixed feelings about the final product.

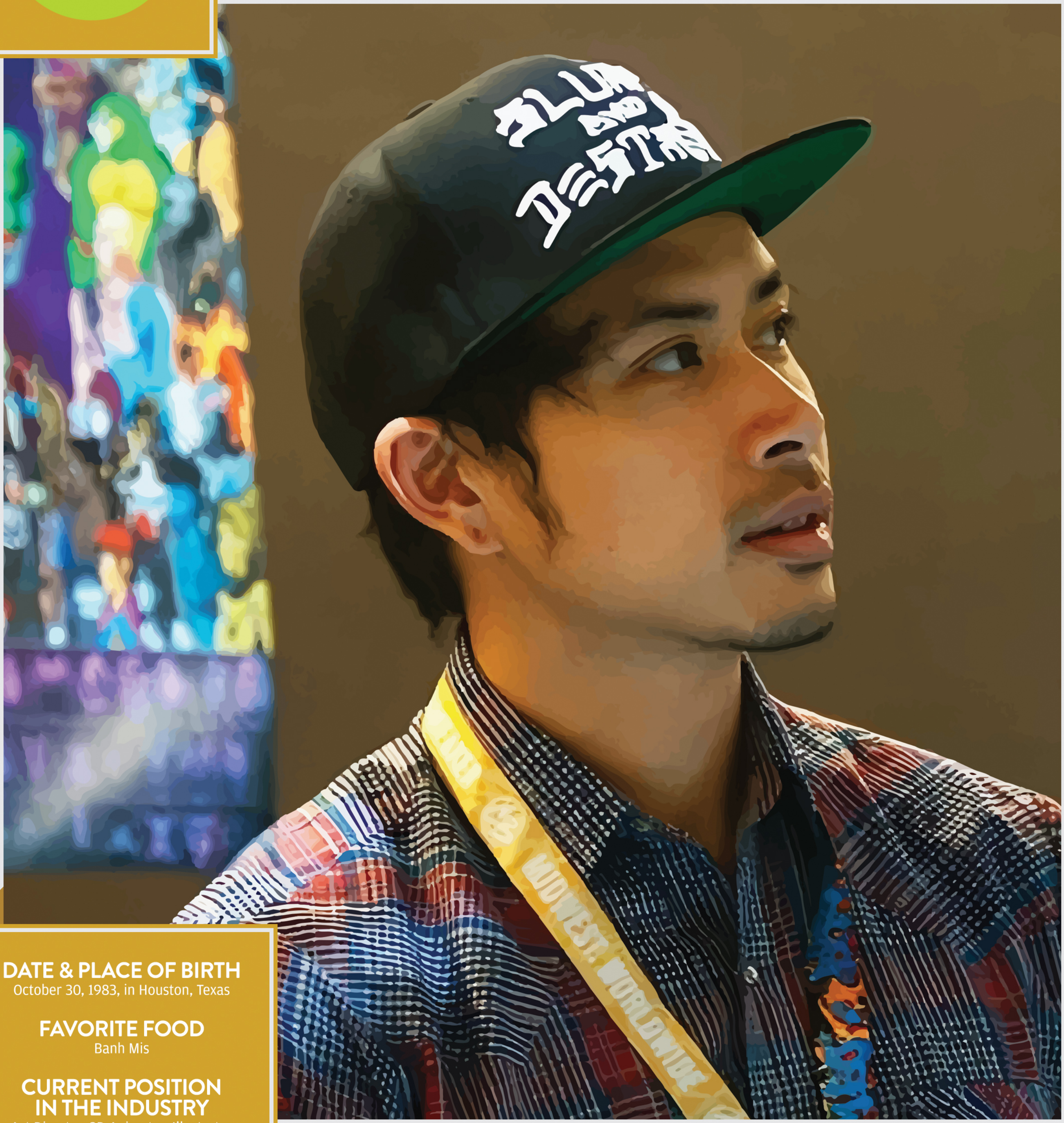
SOUND Voices are used sparingly but the music is fairly well done.

COMMENTS **Dan**–*Being Superman is cool for a few minutes, but the goals are boring.*
Jason–*Take this one up, up and away.*

SCORES
AH-3.7
D-5.8
L-5.5
SP-5.2
N-3.0

GRAPHICS=5.8 PLAY CONTROL=3.7 GAME DESIGN=4.7 SATISFACTION=4.2 SOUND=6.2

4.7 OVERALL RATING



DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
October 30, 1983, in Houston, Texas

FAVORITE FOOD
Banh Mis

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Art Director, 2D Animator, Illustrator

BEST KNOWN FOR
Metal Slug Tactics, Space Maria, Game Gyaru, Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons

DAVID LIU

We stole a few minutes of focus from the hard-working artist who's been entrusted to breathe life back into brands like Metal Slug!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: What were some of the games, movies and other media that were a major influence on you growing up, and how did they shape you as an artist?

DAVID LIU: I grew up loving arcades, with a real passion for beat-'em-ups and fighting games specifically. I put a lot of quarters into the old SNK Neo Geo multi-title cabinets and the classic Capcom games of the early 1990s. The intricate animations their developers somehow seemed to magically be able to make mirrored all the classic anime films I loved, and before I knew it, my mind was racing with inspiration. It quickly became a dream of mine to work in the video game industry in any way I could. I wanted to create art for video games — illustration, concept art, animation, or all of the above.

Experiencing these things at a young age gave me a solid goal for me to set my sights on, and it truly is a blessing to say I've achieved that goal. And I still have more items on my career bucket list waiting to be checked off!

How did you get your first break in the industry?

I got my first break in the industry from my art mentor, Evan Cagle. He was a lead concept artist for a game studio and recruited me because of my ability to both work hard and to parrot the style of art he created. I will never forget how good of an opportunity it was, and how it felt to get that much closer to reaching my goals. I also learned a lot about the production process in video games that are created through a 3D pipeline.

You're an amazing character designer, painter and animator. All of those mediums involve technical drawing and composition skills, but under the surface, they're actually pretty different professions. What are your most and least favorite parts of the process of each of those three, and if you had to pick just one to work in for the rest of your career, which would it be?

My favorite part is when I get to create a layout from scratch based off of an idea from a client. I get to start mapping out the plan and see if it syncs with the vision I have in my head. More often than not, my original plans transform quite a bit after I put pen to paper. The sketch becomes a hybrid of what I had in my head and unintended surprises that seem to come to life on their own. Sometimes it can get frustrating when these things don't line up as expected, but there are also times when the outcome exceeds what I already had planned.

The part of the process I like the least is when I have to start separating out the flat colors. Usually, I'll have to make a hard decision on what my baseline color palette will be. A desaturated dark palette? Or a bright and colorful vibrant palette? These are things that can also change along the way, so it's not a destructive decision, but whatever I choose, I have to commit to until I start focusing on lighting and shading.

I think it's fair to say that you've become a master of box art illustration. What are some of the dos and don'ts of creating a box that is both true to the subject matter while also grabbing people's attention in ways that screenshots and gameplay videos might not?

Always pay attention to the rule of thirds. Place a grid on your composition and plan for the most important parts to be in the core areas of focal emphasis. If you're composing a layout with multiple characters, it's good to pay attention to where a character's gaze will fall. Are characters looking to the left? Are these characters canonically on the same team or have the same ambitions? If they are enemies in the story, it's good to have them not facing the same direction to imply a different perspective in their goals.

The type of audience you're trying to appeal to greatly affects the style of content you're producing. In action games, you'll want to do a portrayal of some action that indicates the style of game to expect when playing. Exciting cover box art can be a challenging task. I tend to spend a good amount of time digging around for inspiration before creating a visual path that I want to take. Sometimes this process can take hours or days depending on what the client is wanting.

Street Fighter, Dragon Quest and many other franchises that were once bastions of in-game 2D art have gone almost exclusively 3D. Do you ever feel like the golden age of 2D art in games has passed us by? What do you think it would take to make AAA games 2D again?

I think we can still have a golden age resurgence with the accessibility of game development and digital art tools. I feel the existence of AAA 2D titles is a hard sell for investors now because they feel the biggest games are in 3D. Any game that utilizes 2D animation can be expensive of course, but would it be AAA viable? I'm not entirely sure.

For instance, I'm working on an original project called Space Maria. My goal with it is to make it a 2D action sidescroller with hand-drawn animation, painted backgrounds and a truly analog feel. So perhaps the trick is to create something that feels AAA, but on an indie budget? That's my hunch. I don't know if that's a goal for anyone else, but it's definitely one for me. But it would be tough. I'm getting older, so I'm running out of time to put in that much sweat equity. My energy and ability to do long, long hours may be shrinking. It takes a bigger toll on me the older I get.

I'm hoping one day to be able to lead a team with all the knowledge I've gained so far, sharing that knowledge with those hungry to learn and create.

One 2D artist who never struggled to find AAA projects to work on was Akira Toriyama. You recently contributed to an animation jam, "Rock the Dragon," that paid tribute to Dragon Ball Z. What was it about Toriyama's work, and the course of his career, that has inspired you the most?

His artwork is iconic. Unmistakable. I still remember the first time I saw his artwork: I was in sixth grade and stumbled upon a collection of his manga, collectibles and recorded films at a Chinese bookstore in Houston. I fell in love with his intricate ink work, his amazing details and his outlandish designs. I was barely exposed to anime at that age! One of the other amazing shows I was aware of then was a series called Ranma 1/2. But with Toriyama, his designs transcended any trope that may have existed between Japanese and Western artwork. It felt like it didn't have a genre. It was a timeless style.

One of the first animations I attempted to make was a Goku fan cartoon that I created frame by frame in MS Paint on my Dad's old PC. What started out small became a full minute of animation that I assembled in a GIF-making program. I even recorded my own sound effects and voices for it! The video is long lost to time but I was incredibly proud of the work I did, considering I was only in sixth or seventh grade.

Toriyama was such an inspiring enigma. Everything he created had his signature style on it that made people stop in their tracks. To think that just one person's art style could transcend so many generations is astounding to me.

It really can't be overstated how many different types of games you've worked on — the upcoming 2D Zelda-like Castaway, the legendary Metal Slug series from SNK, the separate-but-related Double Dragon and River City Girls franchises, as well as smaller indies like Yellow Taxi Goes Vroom are just a few off the top of my head. What do you think it is about your style that fits so well with these vastly different games?

I'm not entirely sure? *(laughs)* I just do my best, and what inspires me. It's hard to say no to these projects because most of them are really amazing. I think what people hire me for is my ability to emulate an older style of art from the early '90s. They say it feels like something old or familiar, but also current and modern. I'm not entirely sure of the chemical makeup of my process, but it definitely seems to be resonating with people, and I'm grateful for that.

I'm a firm believer that people can tell when you're passionate about something or when you're phoning it in. So I tend to try to always do the best that I can, even if it's a project that may feel small. I'm also inspired by the skill and grit of most of these developers. I try to channel that spirit into the work I create for them. If my artwork helps another few thousand people see and consider their games, then that's a possibly few thousand more people that may end up actually purchasing their work, which helps out the developers. I hope that ends up being the case in some of the indie game contracts I've had over the years.

It feels like not a day goes by that you don't announce a piece of art you've been working on. Are there any projects you've contributed to lately that may have flown more under that radar that you'd like to spotlight?

I'm not entirely sure! I think I constantly have some kind of side work happening outside of my full-time job as Art Director at The Odd Gentlemen.

Actually, that might be the answer to your question — the project I'm working on with them right now is really special. It's an incredibly heartfelt story with important themes to share with people of all ages. It's a game called Harmonium, and I would love for it to have the success I feel it deserves. I'm working with a ton of passionate people from all walks of life on this game. To have that kind of game become a success would mean the world to me.

I create a lot of artwork, and most of what I consider my best work, with The Odd Gentlemen. Their creative director lets me explore my own creativity in some very outlandish ways and usually in different styles than what I share on social media. In a way, I feel the artwork I've created for Harmonium transcends styles and genres, almost in the same vein of my view of Toriyama's artwork. I hope people resonate with the artwork I've created for Harmonium. It's incredibly special to me.

You work extremely hard – some would say too hard! What does your ideal career look like from here? What kind of work/life balance would you like to maintain?

Work/life balance? What's that? *(laughs)* I'm trying to work on that, but I think what has happened over the years is that I started to optimize my time. I then started to work faster, harder and longer the more I kept tempering my work ethic.

So ideally, I'd love for my work/life balance to be more . . . balanced! My goal is to make Space Maria, and although I tell myself that I would put 125% of my focus into that work, I'm sure there will be some job that comes along that I can't turn down. My weakness is saying no to games that are being resurrected from my golden era of classic games. Metal Slug was a dream come true because of how much I loved that series. So yeah, if someone asks me, "Hey, can you do key art for **insert retro '90s game**" I'll most likely always say "HECK YEAH, I'm IN!"

Can you tell us more about your plans for the Space Maria game? I've seen a lot of the art you've made of the character exploring various genres, which you've sometimes released around April Fools' Day, but we'd love to know more about what you want the real Space Maria game to be.

I have a game design document (that's somehow already 17 pages long) that's an outline of the style of gameplay I want for it. So I can't get into all 17 of those pages here, but in short, my vision for it would be "what we remember Metal Slug looked like when we first experienced it." The game would fully lean into 2D hand-drawn assets, with cel-shaded, painted backgrounds, hand-drawn VFX, an amazing era-inspired soundtrack and tight gameplay.

The gameplay I have in mind for it is a cooperative shooter/beat-'em-up. Players join in on a linear campaign where they can decide how they want to build their experience. I'm designing the game to be played either entirely with hand-to-hand melee combat or ranged run-'n-gun shooting mechanics. Of course, the optimal experience would be a mix of both of those styles, but I want to allow for different experiences for different players and different playthroughs, and how their different decisions are made during cooperative play.

I'm tempted to go on and on about my design and idea for the game! Those 17 pages live rent-free in my head every day. *(laughs)* But maybe I'll save that for a possible future article with you guys.

On a similar bent, if you had unlimited time and budget to work on an established Nintendo franchise, which would you choose and what kind of game would you make?

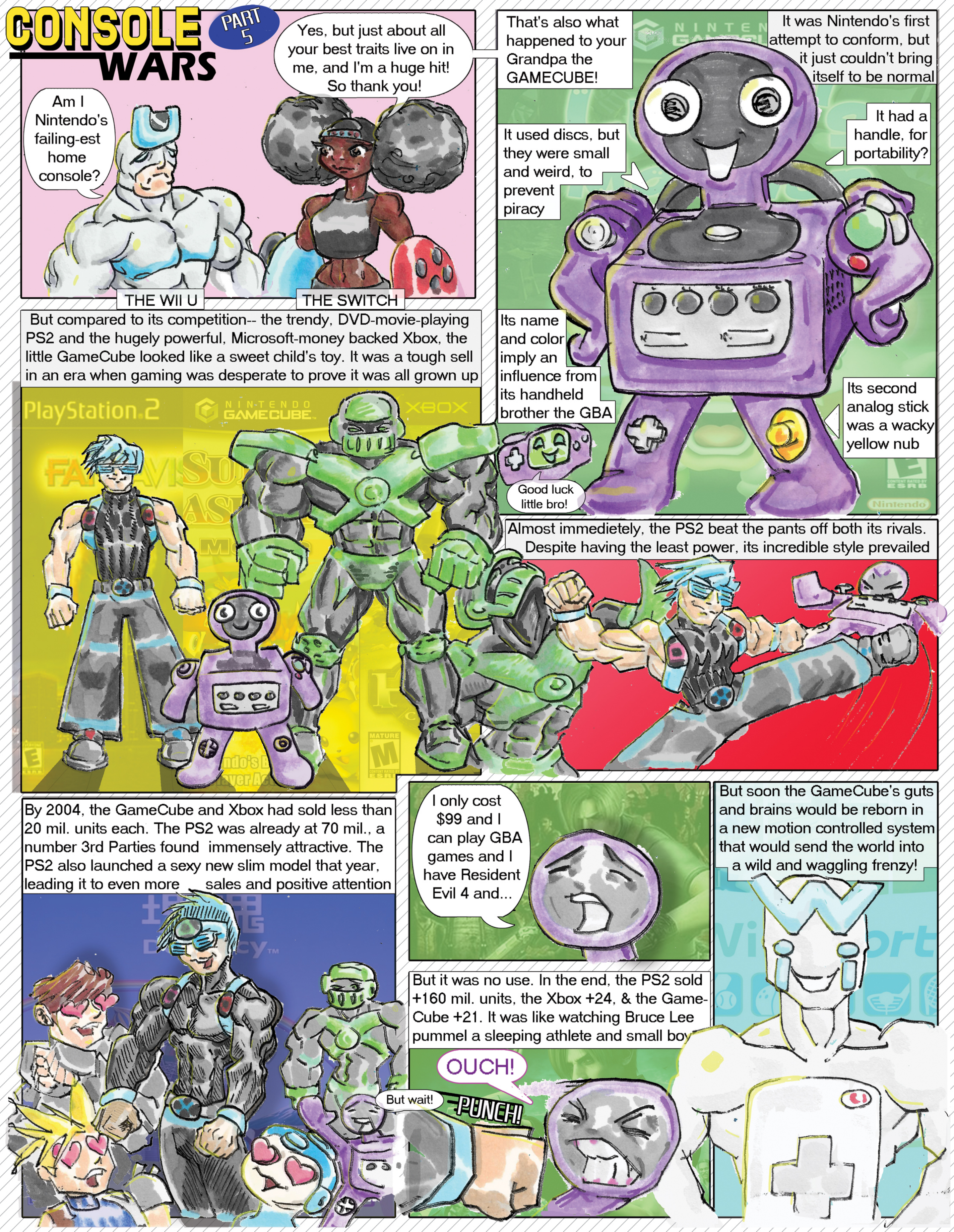
That's a TOUGH one, but right off the top of my head, I'd love to work on a 2D sidescroller Zelda that captures the feel of Zelda II. It was so different from the rest of the games – I randomly think about how cool it would be to revisit a structure like that again.

Another game I would love to have a part of is a new Metroid. Metroid Dread is one of my all-time favorite games and one of the few games I wish I could experience for the first time again.

Finally, if you could have any superpower, which would you choose and why?

I wish I could stop time, but just for me. Like if I could work super fast, or the rest of the world moved slower, I would be able to achieve so much work in a short amount of time, and then have lots of time left over for the things that matter to me – my wife, kids, and personal time. Of course, that's a very slippery slope because knowing me, I would end up just working nonstop, then sleep, then probably work some more. But you know what they say: with great power comes great responsibility.

AFTER ORIGINALLY BEING ANNOUNCED TO BE IN DEVELOPMENT BACK IN 2021, METAL SLUG TACTICS HAS FLOWN UNDER THE RADAR FOR MOST OF THE LAST THREE YEARS. IT WAS RECENTLY RE-REVEALED, THOUGH, WITH THE HELP OF THIS BRAND-NEW KEY ART ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID LIU! TO CHECK OUT MORE OF DAVID'S ARTWORK, VISIT HIS INSTAGRAM PROFILE: @DSLOOGIE.



BY JONATHAN HOLMES & PETE MARSHALL

Akira Toriyama's iconic character designs are the stars of the show in the all-new Dragon Quest Monsters: The Dark Prince. Turn the page to read our full review!

Mix and Match Your Monsters

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

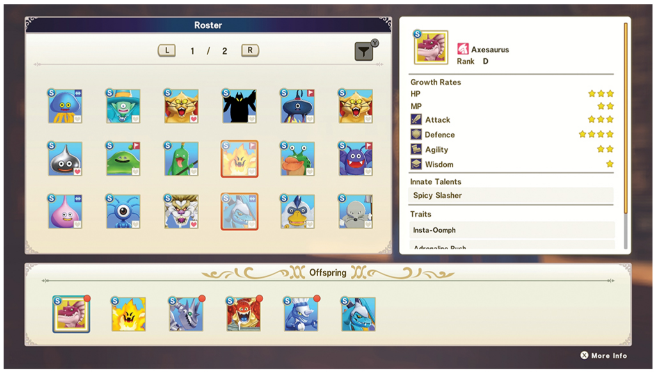
BEHOLD THE SLIME.

Its origin is a game design legend! Yuji Horii, while working on monster concepts for the original Dragon Quest in the '80s, passed a simple sketch of a nondescript blob over to character artist Akira Toriyama. Toriyama then responded with the smiling, cheerful chocolate drop of blue goo seen above – a design so instantly iconic that it's endured, unchanged, for decades.

Toriyama's signature style set the bestiary of the Dragon Quest brand apart from its contemporaries in the RPG space. While more "serious" spins on these same kinds of foes – ghosts, wizards, skeletons, trolls, golems and, of course, dragons – could be found populating the pages of Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manuals, Toriyama's takes were less intimidating and far more fun for DQ's younger audience.

Starting from that standard-setting simple smiling Slime, Toriyama filled the Dragon Quest world with dozens, then hundreds more monster designs over the years, always presenting new funny faces for players of subsequent sequels to fight. The monsters became such a draw in and of themselves that, after the arrival of Pokémon, DQ's creators began to use them to fuel their own monster-wrangling series.

Dragon Quest Monsters: The Dark Prince is the latest sequel in this now 25-year-old spin-off series. It first went on sale on Switch last December, so this review may seem like it's arriving a little late – but the game was a bit unfinished on Day 1, and the dev team has kept working on it and have since released several patches to upgrade key features throughout the first half of 2024, so it's just as well that we've held off on rendering a verdict. It's a better game now than it was then!



The titular Dark Prince is Psaro, an odd name that only diehard DQ fans would recall: He was the final boss of Dragon Quest IV nearly 35 years ago. This game serves as a storyline split-off of that classic mainline adventure, telling the tale of how Psaro rose to power in the land of monsters (before ultimately becoming a monster himself). Luckily, this adventure allows players to retcon his old bad ending of being a villain doomed to die, and redeem his character along the way.

Psaro has been cursed to be unable to harm monsters directly – so he instead must recruit other monsters to do his fighting for him. This plays out with the "Scout" option in battle, with your current team trying to impress potential new recruits with a show of their strength. A percentage meter pops up on the screen with each attempt, and the closer you get to 100%, the more likely your scouting will succeed – but there's always a slim chance you'll win over a powerful new ally with even just a thin result of 5% of so, so scouting almost always feels exciting.

Your active battle team is made up of four different creatures you've been able to persuade to join your cause – unless you choose to use a "Large" creature or two, since they each take up two slots on the squad. Coming up with just the right combination of heavy hitters, healers, support magic users and wild cards is another draw here – it feels satisfying when you put together just the right team of creatures that really click with each other.

Building the best battle battalion involves a lot of menu navigation too, though. Recruiting monsters from the wild – or finding and hatching eggs, also in the wild – won't net you the best beasts. To get those, you'll have to synthesize! Unlike the evolution system in Pokémon, where individual monsters grow stronger and change into more powerful forms on their own, the Dragon Quest Monsters series asks its players to sacrifice two lesser creatures in order to fuse them together to make one stronger fighter. The "child" inherits traits, techniques and skill points from both "parents," so it's a system that you'd be wise to use as often as possible – though it is a bit tough to deal with emotionally if (read: when) you grow attached to key members of your team and are forced to give them up permanently.

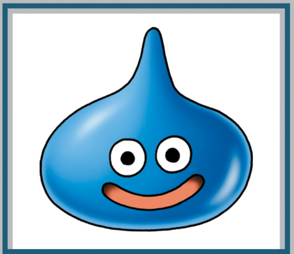
More menu navigation comes into play as you assign Talent Points and decide which skills your monsters will learn, but after that, the menu usage within actual battle scenes is minimal. Fights are auto-piloted for the most part, which the game's A.I. choosing which attacks and abilities your monsters will use while you kick back and just watch it all play out. You do have the option to intercede and give direct commands if you like – and it's often smart to do that in big boss battles with higher stakes and tougher difficulty – but for most of the run-of-the-mill encounters, it's nice to not have to select the same old spells over and over again.

The auto-battling makes the game so user-friendly, in fact, that all four of my game-playing sons have started their own save files in this adventure! I'd hoped that they'd be captivated by Dragon Quest's array of creatures after spending so many years loving Pokémon, and sure enough, after watching me take my own Psaro on his journey of redemption, they couldn't wait to do the same. My 6-year-old was first. Then my 10-year-old. Then my *4-year-old*, Colson (who turned 5 a few weeks later) and finally Carter, currently 12 and a half. Each one of them has had fun putting together his own team of monsters, synthesizing his own unique fusions and coming up with his own silly custom names for the resulting creations. Dragon Quest Monsters is definitely kid-friendly.

The only thing that's given me pause with them playing is that a few of the creatures do look fairly demonic and evil, even after passing through the filter of Akira Toriyama's artistic interpretation. Nothing is *too* scary, but there are designs here that go into darker thematic territory (with skulls and devil horns and the like) than the Pokémon series would ever allow. I'll present a few examples on the next pages to help you make a judgment call for your own family.

Beyond that – and maybe the fact that the story sometimes loses itself a bit and it's occasionally hard to know where to go next – I have few other complaints to level against The Dark Prince. I expected that I'd enjoy this game since I've played and loved past installments in this same series. I didn't predict it'd end up becoming beloved by all of my kids as well!
– LUCAS

9.0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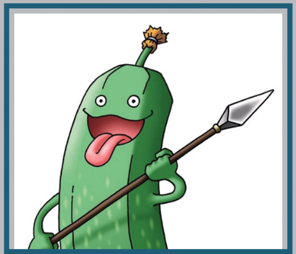
PLATYPUNK

DRACKY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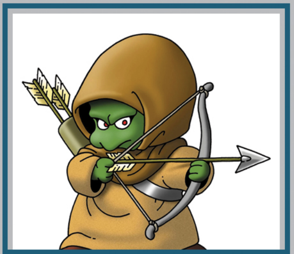
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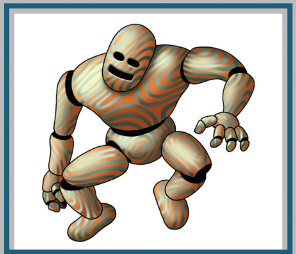
GREAT SABRECUB

FUNGHOUL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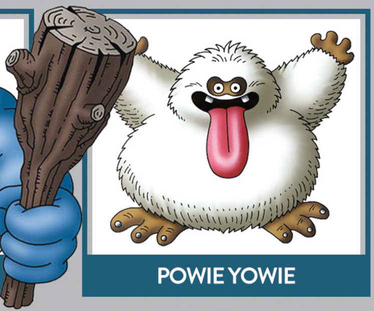
CYCLOPS


POWIE YOWIE

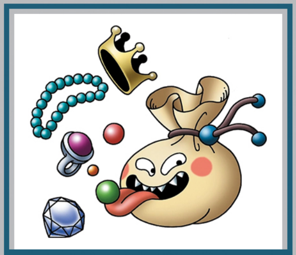
HYPERTHERMION

ROCKBOMB

JAILCAT

GREEN DRAGON

RONIN RACCOON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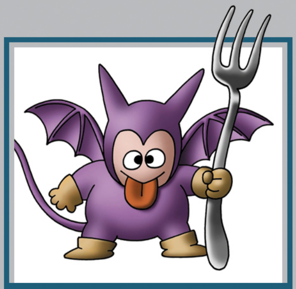
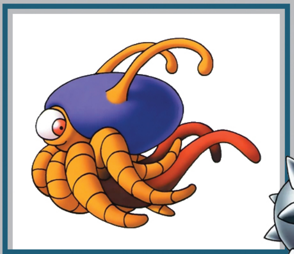
MOOSIFER


IMP

WEARTIGER

LUMP WIZARD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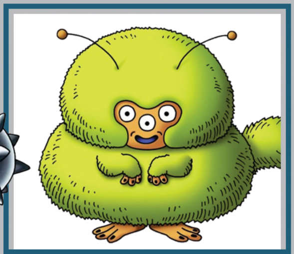
SWINGRE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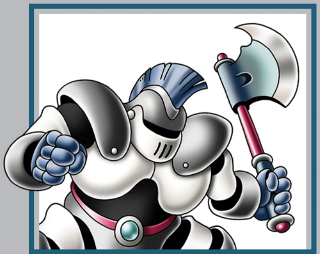
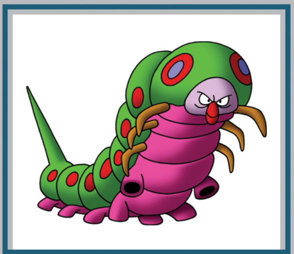

KNIGHT ABERRANT

GARUDA

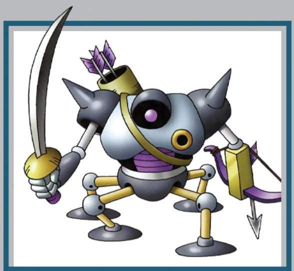
BUNICORN

LEERY LOUT

JUMPING JACKAL

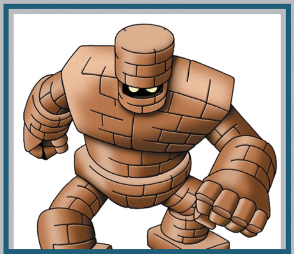

KILLERPILLAR

VEGANDRAGORA


HUNTER MECH

PUTREFIDO

DANCING DEVIL


GOLEM

DECADES OF DIFFERENT DESIGNS

AKIRA TORIYAMA'S DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS

WHEN AKIRA TORIYAMA was first hired to design monsters for the original Dragon Quest back in the '80s, he created 15 different creatures in total. Several recolored variations of those base-level beasts increased the overall variety of enemies in that first Quest up to 40 (a necessary compromise to compensate for the limited storage of 8-bit cartridges), but even when a Slime became a Red Slime or a Metal Slime through nothing more than a palette swap, Toriyama's skill still shone through and players accepted each revision as unique and distinct.

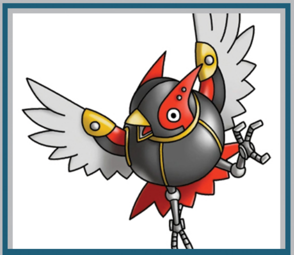
Through the decades that followed, those early technological limitations have faded away, and sequels and spin-offs in the Dragon Quest series have been able to debut dozens – even hundreds – of additional Akira Toriyama creations made to further populate the franchise's ever-widening worlds. Dragon Quest Monsters: The Dark Prince serves as a gathering place for nearly all of those Akira-created creatures! There are over 500 different beasts to battle, beat and befriend here.

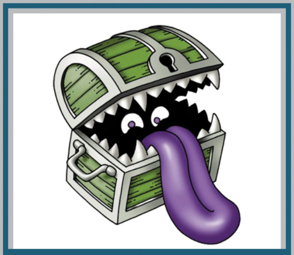
Though, admittedly, dozens of those 500+ are still recolors. The DQM series doesn't have nearly as many totally unique character designs as Pokémon when all is said and done – but with every one of its monsters having sprung forth from the mind of the Master of Manga, you can certainly make a "quality over quantity" argument in favor of this brand. (Printed here are just a few dozen examples. There are many more beyond these to be found in the game itself.)

The Dark Prince does feature a few all-new monster designs too, each noted as such here. And Square Enix also did a crossover promotion with McDonald's in Japan, leading to the incredible "Mimic with Cheese" seen just below!

GHOST

ORC


MECHA-MYNAH

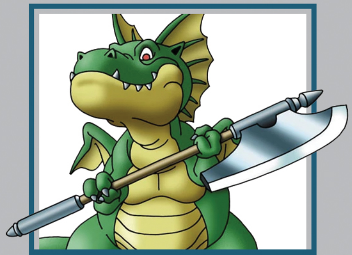

MIMIC

MIMIC WITH CHEESE

MEOWGICIAN

ARCHDEMON

FROMAGE FREY


HACKSAURUS

GOOMULONIMBUS

The Arcade Exclusive Comes Home

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES ARCADE: WRATH OF THE MUTANTS

SINCE DEBUTING IN 1984, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles has been an "evergreen" brand. **Rimshot!** New incarnations have popped up every few years, and as the franchise continued to grow and evolve – or mutate, if you prefer – older incarnations have resurfaced with new material. The 1987 Fred Wolf cartoon was particularly enduring, while the black-and-white Mirage Comic original has been known to find its way into newer media as well.

That's why it probably shouldn't be *too* surprising to see the 2012 version, the first following Nickelodeon's purchase of the green machines, pop up once again. The game itself first showed up in arcades in 2017, at the tail end of that show's run, but after seven years, it looked like it might never get a home port.

Shortly after it first arrived, NFers David Oxford and Tony Ponce met up in Toronto for a slice before moving on to dice some Foot and Kraang soldiers in the nearby Rec Room. Now, with the title reborn as Wrath of the Mutants on home hardware, they're teaming up again to shred the Shredder, with David donning Mikey's colors and Tony representing Donny.

Well, "teaming up" in the spiritual sense, as WotM lacks online multiplayer. I tackled the adventure solo, while you enjoyed a co-op run with your wife Nadia. How was that, by the way?

Honestly? Like most games in the genre, it was fun. More fun than tackling it alone would have been, at any rate, though I think she might have preferred it if I had. Also, I lament the complete lack of revivals, team moves or anything else like that, but then what do you expect from a quarter-muncher?

Gotta be honest, my solo run was a bit of a drag. The arcade original is technically older than Shredder's Revenge, but I can't help but prefer that title's greater focus on technical combos over Wrath of the Mutants' more straightforward button-mashing, as faithful to the early '90s arcade experience as that may be.

Yeah, WotM definitely felt like it was trying to be more of a throwback to the '90s in a different, more direct way than Shredder's Revenge. Some familiar moves, like the body slam and throwing enemies into the screen, as well as the whole first part of the Sewer level, were basically lifted straight from Turtles in Time.

I wish Raw Thrills had lifted the dash as well. Along with slow enemy movements, the game's overall speed felt way too sluggish.

Yeah, I was just thinking that, if anything, I wish they'd lifted *more* from Turtles in Time. The sprint, the somersaults, the slide . . . being able to zip around quicker certainly would have been welcome. Sure, they're Turtles, but they're also Teenage Mutant Ninjas!

Also, and maybe this is just me, but the way your Turtle would immediately turn to face the nearest enemy when you pressed the attack button? Constantly threw me off. I would often turn away from my intended target, leading to my Turtle teen taking unnecessary damage.

I had a little trouble with that, too. It didn't become a problem *too* often, but I think it caused me to bean Nadia with a big rock at one point.

Oh, so there's friendly fire? Any way to disable it?

None that I could find. We got languages, subtitles and thankfully different volume settings so you can turn down the crazy-loud cursor on the menus, but nothing for friendly fire.

Speaking of volume, was the audio mixing completely borked for you as well?

At first, but once I turned down the environmental sounds, things seemed alright.

In my case, the voice clips overpowered everything else. I mean, props to Raw Thrills for bringing most of the 2012 actors back to re-record dialogue, but the repeated one-liners got old *sooo* quickly! Side note: Did Greg Cipes' Michelangelo sound strained to

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAMEMILL DEVELOPERS: CRADLE GAMES & RAW THRILLS RATING: E10+

you? Dude's in his early 40s. His pipes shouldn't be that bad at such a young age!

Hmm, maybe? I played as Mikey throughout, but I didn't really notice. Though now that I think back, Nadia did at least remark on the repetitiveness of the sound bites.

Rob Paulsen of course killed it as Donatello, however! No notes!

Yeah, the voices were really good in this. Like they were straight out of the cartoon, as you said, and definitely helped make revisiting this corner of the Turtleverse a more pleasant experience.

I also enjoyed the six new bosses added to the home port, pulling in more characters from the show's wild cast. For all my issues with this game's presentation and control, the source may be my favorite animated TMNT series.

I don't like to play favorites, but yeah, 2012 was definitely one of the upper-tier iterations of the franchise.

By the way, do you know if they got those characters like Karai who weren't in the original arcade version to reprise their roles? I didn't really get to see the credits, as the game locked up on me after reaching the ending.

To the best of my knowledge, of the newcomers, only Rahzar had to be recast, with Fred Tatasciore filling in for Clancy Brown. As for the returning Kraang Subprime, given the passing of Gilbert Gottfried, Raw Thrills simply reused his lines from the arcade version.

Makes sense.

I'd say on the whole, the game's presentation is top-notch (though something about the ending felt a little odd). It's more on the technical side of things where it stumbles. Even then, I wouldn't say it's bad, just . . . fine? Like, aggressively, confidently fine?

Certainly basic by current belt brawler standards. That extends to its ho-hum soundtrack and lack of additional features beyond the two new extra levels. (Technically three, as Shredder's Lair was expanded a bit.)

Yeah, even some of the bosses feel kind of same-y. They all have a stomp attack that's nearly impossible to avoid. Which reminds me, did you notice any lag? Most of the time, the game felt fine to me, but anything more precise than button-mashing really highlighted those input delays.

Somewhat. I would always jump right when I saw "Jump!" splash across the screen – yeah, nice immersive telegraphing! – but you practically have to intuit when the prompt is coming to avoid the attack on time.

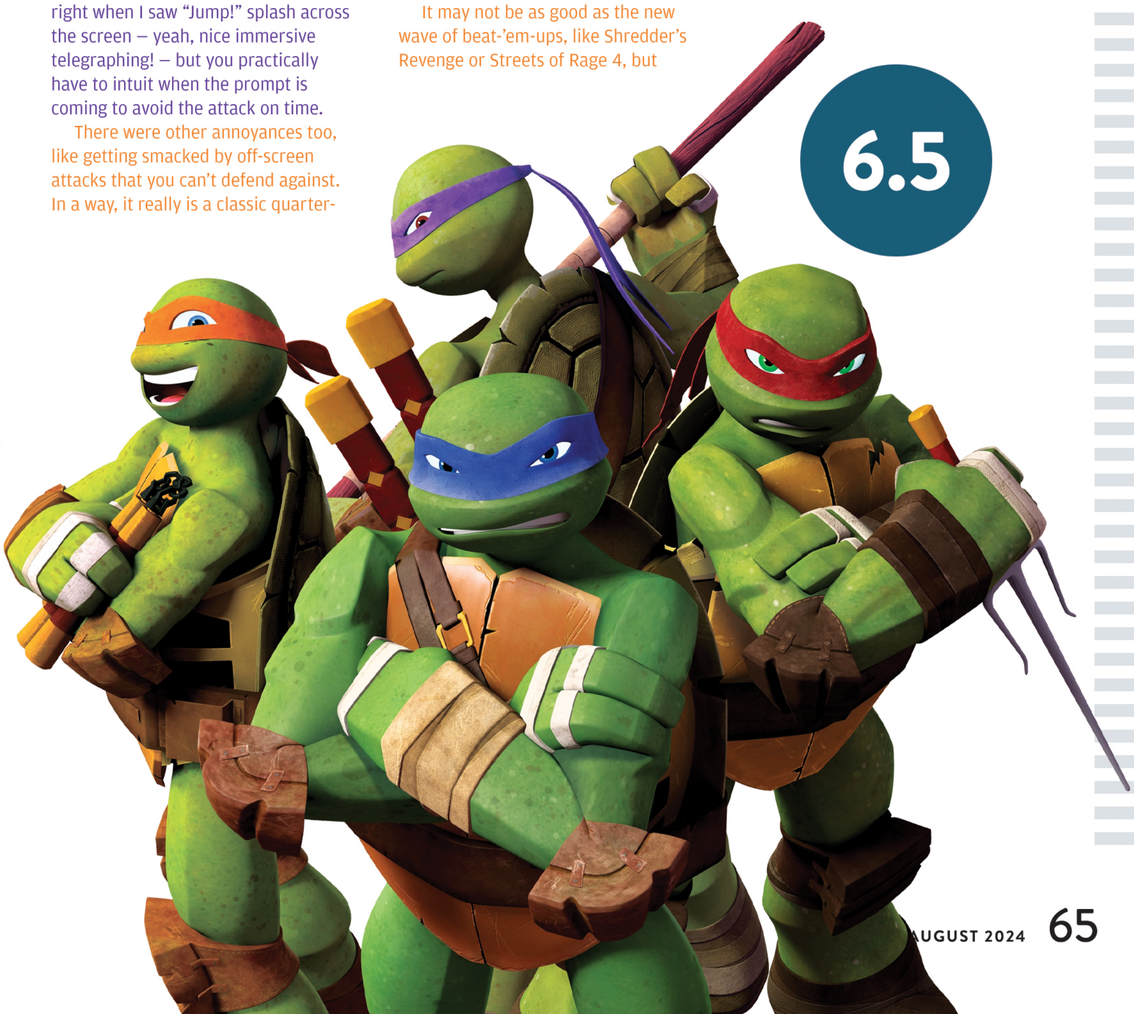
There were other annoyances too, like getting smacked by off-screen attacks that you can't defend against. In a way, it really is a classic quarter-muncher – yet while the genre might have moved beyond some of that stuff at home, arcades gonna arcade, I guess.

I did have the opportunity to replay the arcade version this past winter break with my brother and cousin, and I admit, WotM as originally intended does lend itself better to that environment. You simply can't recreate that same atmosphere at home. Really a shame, as this was the first true TMNT arcade game since Turtles in Time. Those are some mighty big boots to fill.

It may not be as good as the new wave of beat-'em-ups, like Shredder's Revenge or Streets of Rage 4, but it's fine, maybe decent enough if you've got another Turtles fan (or fans) to play with locally. Kids might get more out of it, especially those who are just starting to pick up a controller, as you can pretty much brute-force your way through with near-mindless button-mashing on the easier difficulties, even with the lag. But that also depends on how they feel about the Turtles from two iterations ago. That said, it's still kinda nice to revisit some of the highlights from this era of TMNT history.

– DAVID & TONY

6.5



An Encore of Extrabiblical Battles

EL SHADDAI: ASCENSION OF THE METATRON HD REMASTER

A WILDLY CREATIVE adaptation of the ancient Book of Enoch, El Shaddai tells the tale of a hard-fighting scribe from Heaven who's sent by God to wrangle a group of fallen angels called the Grigori. Like those rapscallion sentries of the Lord gone wild, everything about the game aims to break boundaries. The visuals bend the line between 2D and 3D, regularly flipping from purely polygonal to hand-drawn or painted. The narrative melds magic and science with sincerity and irreverence, with plenty of fourth wall breaking to boot. It also stretches its resources further than it can reach – its less-than-big budget often leads to some pitfalls. But for the most part, its fiery soul more than makes up for any blemishes that pop up along the way.

A game based on a noncanonical Old Testament era text may sound dry, but nothing could be further from the truth! Cute, cannibalistic creatures born from angel and man called the Nephilim suddenly become friend *and* foe. Biblical floods are threatened. Battles against David Bowie look-a-likes commence. A motorcycle chase against giant robots in a massive futuristic city nonchalantly takes the forefront, and there's even a dance number with a moonwalking angel who mugs for the camera like the Nintendog assist trophy from Smash Bros.! Nothing is off limits in this insane interpretation.

And though they may sound random, all these story beats are underpinned by deep philosophical questions about faith, free will, hope, marketing hype, love and loss, with few easy answers to be found. For example, in optional 2D platforming sections with lowered gravity, Enoch may get sucked into the creeping liquid darkness, leading to an abrupt "bad ending." Then a trailer for the parts of the game you haven't seen yet plays, enticing you to load an old save and give it another shot. From there, it's up to you to either commit to Enoch's true destiny, or let fate crush him prematurely.

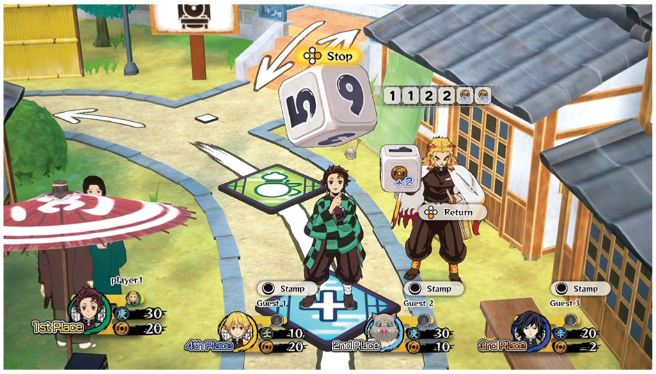
The game also asks you to make constant choices in combat. It's less about memorizing long combos and more about deciding which of the enemies' three weapons to steal at any given time. There's a Rock/Paper/Scissors-style dynamic – blades work well against shields, shields work well against missiles, etc. – that inspires experimentation. Each implement also gives you different aerial maneuvers, which can help with the sometimes unfairly tricky platforming. (Without the ability to adjust your camera, it can be really hard to know exactly where you're going to land, especially in areas where the perspective is warped.)

We can chalk up some of these issues to a lack of resources. The game's wings were clipped due to financial issues with its original publisher, a company that closed shortly after its original release in 2011. In fact, El Shaddai was supposed to end with an additional three chapters, detailing Lucifer's famed fall from grace and Enoch's titular ascension to Metatron status. It's a shame the game's final acts were never brought to playable form, but as a consolation, this HD remaster includes their illustrated scripts as unlockables.

Despite still feeling a bit diminished by forces outside its control, El Shaddai offers up a unique, exciting and memorable experience, even after all this time. **– JONATHAN**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: GAMERA GAMES & CRIM DEVELOPER: CRIM
RATING: T



An Anime-Infused Mario Party

DEMON SLAYER -KIMETSU NO YAIBA- SWEEP THE BOARD!

SLAY POWERFUL DEMONS, rise through the ranks of the Demon Slayer Corps *and* play minigames?!

As a huge fan of the anime Demon Slayer (Kimetsu no Yaiba), this was a must-have for my Nintendo Switch collection. Demon Slayer's first season released in the United States back in January 2021. From then on, the series skyrocketed in popularity as new episodes kept airing and merchandise sales went through the roof! That merchandise has included video games, the latest of which is Sweep the Board from Sega and Aniplex.

As you start to Sweep the Board, you can choose to play as any of the nine Hashira or three main characters: Tanjiro, Zenitsu or Inosuke. Each of the five maps represents an arc from the anime and has the same demons that were present during those missions. Your objective is to reach a destination and gain points to improve your standing in the Demon Slayer Corps.

During the day you can travel the board, visit shops and play minigames. At the end of everyone's turns during the day, a minigame will automatically be played. You earn ranking points depending on how well you do. The minigames were my favorite part of Demon Slayer: Sweep the Board, as it was fun to see how they incorporated the series and characters into the different scenarios.

Once you reach a destination during the daytime, the map will switch to night – and that's when the demons come out to play! During the night, shops close and Event Spaces change to Demon Spaces. Demons have their own destination spot that the characters must travel to.

There are no minigames during the nighttime section of the game, except for one boss battle where everyone battles the demon that appeared. Each character gets ranking points depending on how well they do during the fight. The character who earns the most points by the end of the game wins!

Although I am an admirer of the Demon Slayer series, this game admittedly does leave a lot to be desired. Its gameplay loop is repetitive: You go to the destination during the daytime, then go to the new destination during the nighttime. Rinse and repeat until all the turns are up. And while the mechanics on the map do change, there's no real way to interact with the other players on the board.

I appreciate that you can choose whether you want to play handheld or with motion controls, but fighting the demons is extremely easy either way. The demons always have the same pattern, and once you memorize it, fighting them feels like a chore that you must do to get back to daytime.

But there are fun things about the game that still had me enjoying my time with it. The first thing I noticed when I started the game was how stylized it feels: The menus, characters and maps are all in the same style as the anime. There are also interactions between characters that bring life into each mission. It was as if I'd stepped into an episode of the anime itself!

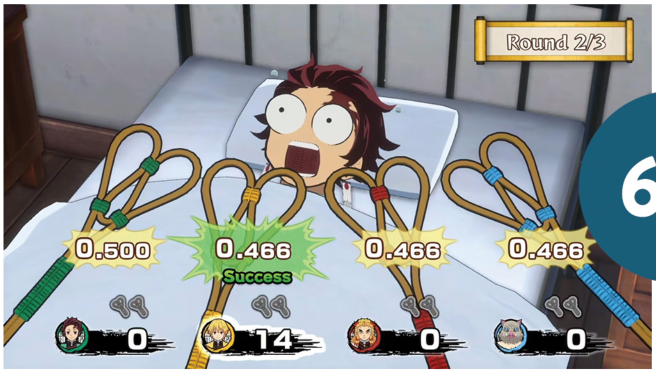
I also really enjoyed playing online, and with friends who are also big fans of the show. The minigames especially were intense as we all competed to be the top-ranked Demon Slayer!

The closest party game that I can compare it to is Super Mario Party. Each character has their own specialized dice block, with different numbers than the normal dice block. You can land on ally spaces and use *their* specialized dice blocks. There are even stamps you can use to express yourself when playing online.

The minigames themselves also remind me a lot of the Mario Party series in general, but with a Demon Slayer coat of paint on top. Which isn't a bad thing! Super Mario Party is a solid game in its own series. I just wish that Demon Slayer: Sweep the Board stood out more, with a more unique identity.

This game is a must-have for big fans of the Demon Slayer anime, but party game fans can go ahead and roll right past it. **– EMMA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: ANIPLEX RATING: T



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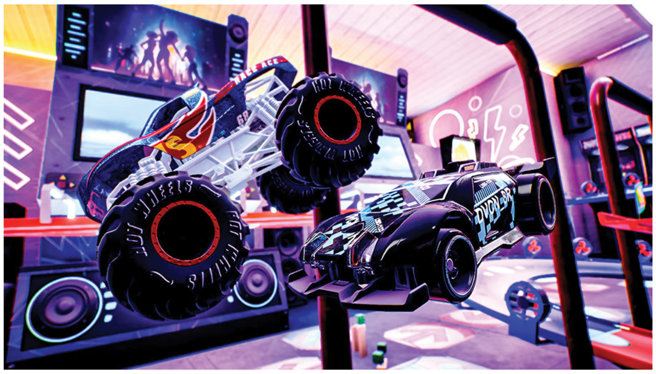


Fan Feedback Followed

HOT WHEELS UNLEASHED 2: TURBOCHARGED

ISN'T IT JUST so nice when a team of developers actually listens to their players?

I don't know how common of a complaint it was among others who tried the first Hot Wheels Unleashed game a few years ago, but my main critique was that it was just too dang hard. Like, wildly difficult – in a way that I knew must've been terribly frustrating for any kids who tried to play it, since it was giving a seasoned veteran like me so much trouble right out of the gate. The challenge just didn't seem to be balanced correctly, at all – the A.I. opponents were far too fierce and the requirements for completion of races/missions were far too strict. I was only able to play through a handful of levels in the solo campaign before I hit a wall and wanted to just turn the game off.

Which was a shame! Because it looked gorgeous, and clearly had been built with a lot of love for the brand.

Two years later, the same team rolled out this sequel. And, blessedly, it is not nearly so difficult. The A.I. is set to a new Easy level by default, the completion times for time trials have been relaxed a bit . . . *phew!* Exhale. I feel like I can breathe this time, and actually fully enjoy the game instead of wanting to tear my hair out.

And so, a reintroduction is in order: Hot Wheels Unleashed takes the little die-cast metal cars that kids have known and loved for decades and makes fully playable the kind of high-octane races that have previously only played out in those kids' imaginations. The iconic orange plastic tracks twist, turn and wrap around elements of larger-than-life, realistic environments – because every racetrack presented here is rendered at Toy Story scale, letting you control these cars at their actual size of just a couple of inches long apiece.

It's brilliant. And must've been a ton of work to make, too! Because every track has the track itself, first and foremost, but then the whole big environment beyond is fully modeled and interactive as well. So if you hit a jump too fast and go flying off the track, your car will land down on the ground or the carpet or wherever you are . . . and you'll get to just keep driving around if you want to. (You'll probably lose the race if you get too distracted, but you have the option!)

Luckily, that kind of free-wheeling exploration of the big environments is tapped into with Checkpoint Races, which ditch the orange plastic tracks and just plunk your car down on the counter of a '50s diner or in between exhibits at a dinosaur museum, and then you get to blast around on the floor like an obstacle course hunting for glowing pillars of light to pass through. That's cool.

There's also a new story in this sequel, wherein you'll get occasional cartoon slideshow cutscenes starring some hotshot racecar drivers. They're humans, but they choose to shrink themselves down to tiny proportions so they can drive all the Hot Wheels they want. Sure? Why not? You do you!

The racing team is fighting back against several toy creatures that have become evil, and winning target-smashing races against them unlocks them as special components that can be used in the Track Editor mode. That's a nice bit of cross-mode synergy – and the Track Editor seems to have a fairly strong fan following, as, like Super Mario Maker 2, there's always a bunch of new courses to try out if you go online while playing.

The game is still a bit cash-grabby when it shows off extra cars that take real money to buy through the eShop, but the in-game rewards are more than generous and I never felt pressured to have to buy a more powerful vehicle in order to succeed. Controls seem a bit better than before too, the music is solid and the visuals are slick.

Overall, I'm pretty impressed at what this team turned out this time! Thanks for listening to the feedback from the fans, fam! **– LUCAS**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: MILESTONE RATING: E

10

When a Girl Enrolls at an All-Boys School

JACK JEANNE

THE OTOME GENRE has been staring me in the face for years. As a fan of leading ladies and romance, these games, which are known for featuring a female heroine and multiple routes where you can pair her with different bachelors, have intrigued me for a while.

So, enter stage left, Jack Jeanne. This otome/rhythm game from Tokyo Ghoul mangaka Sui Ishida stars Kisa Tachibana, an aspiring actress who's all but given up on her dream until she gets a chance to attend the prestigious all-male Univeil Drama School.

The only catch? She must disguise herself as a man and land a leading role in the final performance of the school year to stay enrolled.

Genderbend premises like these can sometimes devolve into putting the protagonist into comedic and/or inappropriate situations, but Jack Jeanne handled this scenario with great care.

Kisa isn't the most stereotypically feminine person at Univeil. In the school's productions, men play both male and female roles. Male roles are called Jacks. Female roles are called Jeannes. Many male students embrace more feminine appearances, and everyone is very accepting.

This helps Kisa blend in, and she's assigned to Univeil's Quartz class with six others, who become her potential romance options in the game.

Jack Jeanne features a common route that makes up about 75 percent of its story, and then depending on your choices, one of seven ending routes will unlock.

You access these routes by engaging with the game's calendar system. Most days offer an opportunity to raise a stat related to one of the members of Quartz. For example, singing connects you with Quartz's star vocalist Mitsuki Shirota, while running brings you closer to fellow first-year student Suzu Orimaki.

For most of the common route, you're locked into focusing on one stat if you want to experience a certain character's route afterwards, and it can get a bit repetitive.

Also, this structure requires you to repeat the common route seven times to get the needed stats for each path that comes after. Even with a fast-forward option, it's a tedious task for players wanting the full experience.

However, Jack Jeanne's story, cast and aesthetics are so strong that the prospect of playing it seven times in total doesn't faze me. Yes, it's that good!

This coming-of-age story revolves around Kisa and her Quartz classmates as they hone their acting skills and perform. Romance blossoms along the way, and much of it leans in a sweet and touching direction.

Each member of Quartz has their own passion for acting and special connection with Kisa, and it all comes alive in their performances throughout the school year.

From engaging narratives and catchy music to roles that allow the members of Quartz to personally grow and change, each one left me wanting more! Ishida's art added to the beauty of it all with gorgeous illustrations.

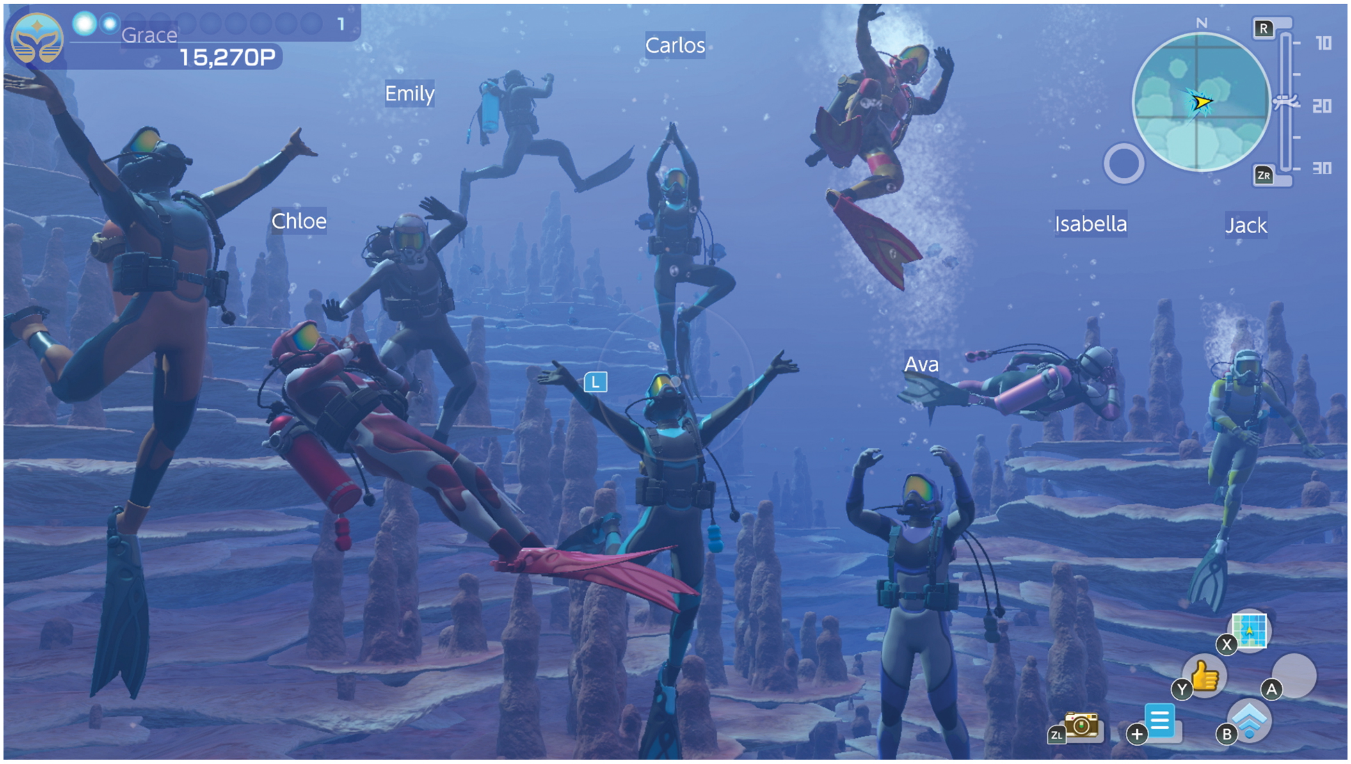
I also have to hand it to Jack Jeanne's voice actors. Not only did they excel at bringing the game's cast to life, but they also had to sing and portray characters who were actors that took on many different roles. That's no small task, and they absolutely delivered.

The performances are also where Jack Jeanne's rhythm game system comes into play. Here, you become a part of the show while the members of Quartz sing and dance.

I appreciated how accessible these rhythm games were. Each song had multiple difficulty options, so you could adjust them to your skill level, and the game gives you chances to practice them beforehand.

As my first foray into otome, Jack Jeanne blew me away! And for better or worse, it set the bar high for other experiences. Like a quartz, this game shines from all sides. **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: AKSYS GAMES
DEVELOPER: BROCCOLI
RATING: T



A Sunken Social Experience

ENDLESS OCEAN: LUMINOUS

WE TRY TO predict the winners.

When we're planning our coverage in each NF issue, we do our best to promote only the best and brightest. We've got limited page space, after all, and it doesn't make sense to spend ink on stinkers – so we try to gaze into our crystal ball and predict, to the best of our ability, which video games set to release in the months ahead most deserve our time and attention.

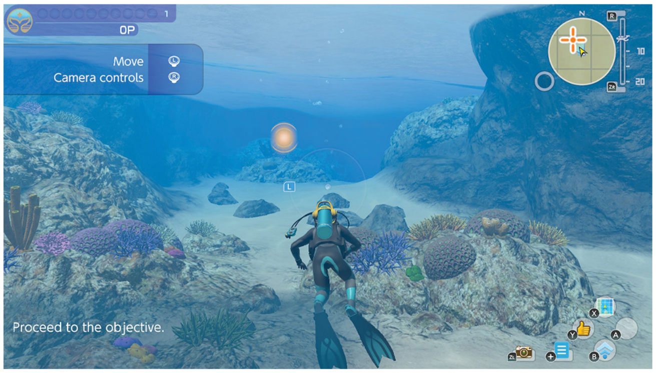
We don't always get it right.

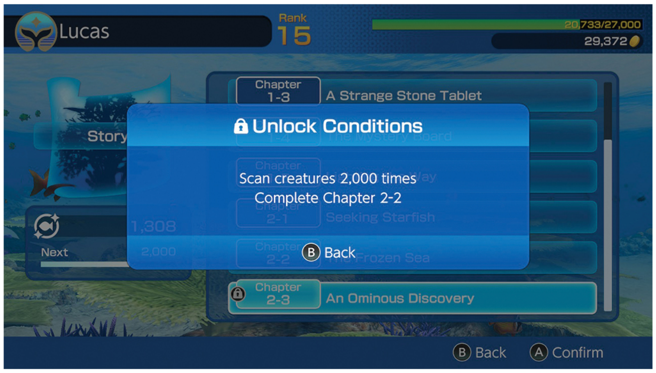
Even the game we select for our coveted cover spot sometimes turns out to be less than worthy of that honor, in hindsight! (The only one I really regret is Mighty No. 9 claiming the cover of NF #19, but some others have probably raised eyebrows over the years as well.) The latest to join that infamous club of disappointing flubs? Endless Ocean: Luminous.

Now, I stand by my reasoning for granting this game the cover spot of our last edition, as it reawakened a franchise that had been dormant for over a decade, early looks made it seem like a perfectly suitable and souped-up sequel compared to its Wii era predecessors . . . and there's only so many times in a row we can put Mario front-and-center. (It would've been four if we'd gone with Thousand-Year Door.) But the final game is weak.

Shallow, to revisit our water theme. Thin. There just isn't much to do!

What's worse? Endless Ocean: Luminous deliberately locks players out of accessing most of what little content it does offer. I have no idea why the developers would choose to use a progression system like this, and it boggles my mind even further that no one at Nintendo, while taking on the game as a publisher, had feedback for this ridiculous "feature."





I'm swimming a little ahead of myself. Let me back up a bit, take another deep breath from my scuba tank and dive in again.

Endless Ocean: Luminous was built with multiplayer in mind. Scenes like the screen seen on the left are the ideal that the devs at Arika were aiming for: Online play sessions packed with divers gathered together from all over the world, each enjoying company and community as they explored the ocean depths and discovered new, exotic species of marine life. It's the big new feature for this sequel, setting it apart from the series' more single-player-focused previous installments. (There was some multiplayer in the Wii era Endless Oceans, but not "Up to 30 players at once!" as this one has been able to brag about.)

The problem? The developers made the call that the multiplayer mode was *so* important in this sequel that they basically force players to play it.

There is a single-player story here – but it's walled off. You are only allowed to play it for a few minutes, covering a handful of brief tutorial missions, before you run straight into a lock screen. You're not allowed to play any further! You're not allowed to access additional story chapters until you scan hundreds, then *thousands* of creatures while playing the other modes – like the multiplayer mode, Shared Dives.

It's a tedious task. You'll have to go into the multiplayer mode and play through multiple sessions of 10, 20 or 30 minutes apiece to be able to encounter enough creatures to scan to fill up the progress meter enough to be let into the next story chapter. Then, when you finally play that solo mode, you'll get a mission that'll take you maybe five minutes to finish, and then a cutscene will play, and you'll be kicked out to the main menu again, with the lock screen reactivated and your target for creature scanning reset to an even loftier and more tedious total.

. . . Why? Just why. Both of the Wii games in this series excelled as solo experiences, and all of that design DNA has just been carved out of this woefully flawed follow-up.

Maybe the devs knew the single-player content was weak, so this was their way to shoo players away from it. Maybe they were worried that not enough players would go online and keep their servers adequately populated, so they funneled everyone toward that mode first and foremost. (You can do Solo Dives, but those are just the same thing as the multiplayer mode – tossing you into a randomized sea to explore – but without letting anyone else in to swim alongside you.)

It gets worse: The gameplay itself is also shallow. *Maybe* the locked-levels structure would've felt less egregious if the game had been truly compelling and replayable! But it isn't. It's just swimming around.

You swim around a procedurally generated map. You can dive deeper or kick back up toward the surface. You occasionally find glowing spots on the ground – pressing A while near those will grant you some small treasure item like a lost necklace or a bar of gold – and then you scan fish. Hundreds and thousands of fish.

Scanning involves pointing a simple targeting reticule in the general direction of a creature and pressing L. After a few seconds, the name of its species will appear and the camera will zoom in to give you a closer look. You also have the option to read (or listen to) a paragraph or so of actual educational information about that species.

That part is admittedly done well – anyone who genuinely wanted to learn more about hundreds of different sea creatures really could do so by playing this game. And, also admittedly, each of the hundreds of different creatures does look great – they've all been modeled, textured and animated well, in a real step up from the non-HD Wii generation.

But those two high points just can't make up for the lows. And so, I offer an apology: As someone who liked the earlier Endless Oceans and thought this third installment had a chance to be something special, I may have given it more of a spotlight than it deserved. We try to predict the winners. We do our best. But, sometimes, we're out of our depth. **– LUCAS**

5.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: ARIKA
RATING: E

Crustacean Gets Crushed

ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

AWW, JUST LOOK at that little guy! Sweet. Precious. An innocent little happy-go-lucky crab boy just about to set out on a whimsical adventure.

. . . Right?

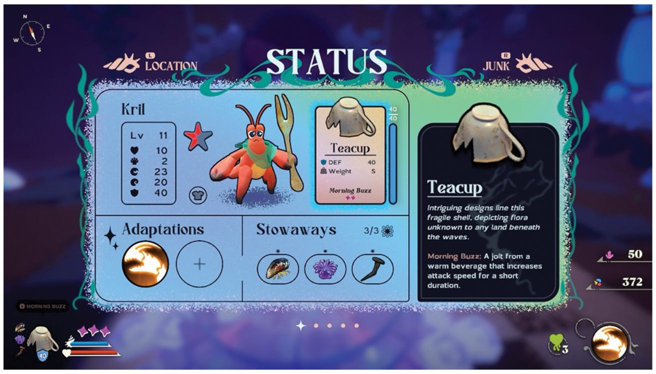
Don't be fooled! Another Crab's Treasure may look like a Disney movie on the surface, but that's all a sham – this game is really a brutally difficult quest that has no qualms about squashing that little crab boy flat.

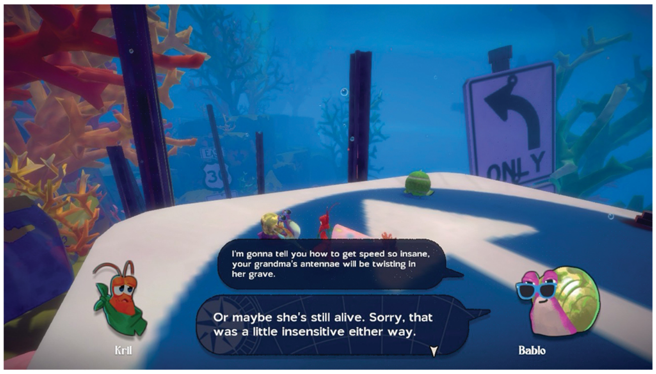
Or snapping him in two, or lopping his head right off his body. Seriously, the level of violence that is visited upon this tiny cartoon creature is honestly disturbing.

That's all by design, of course. The creators of this game specifically wanted their players to be lulled into a false sense of security by the cheerful visuals – because it'd make their first gruesome death hit all the harder.

Another Crab's Treasure is a Souls-like – a still fairly new category of action video games set apart by their emphasis on close-quarters combat and a punishing degree of difficulty. Death will come for players early and often in this adventure – especially those who don't have past experience playing these kinds of games. (Like me.) Luckily, my early losses didn't cause me too feel too frustrated, thanks to an smart choice by the devs.

The robust difficulty adjustment menu! Full-on cheats are built right into the experience for anyone who wants (or needs) to activate them. You can dial down the damage you take from enemy attacks – all the way down to 0, if you like, making young Kril, our hero, fully invincible. You can bump up the defenses of his shells as well, also making them indestructible if you like. It's a game-saving quality-of-life addition.





Because I had access to that slider to move the challenge level up and down whenever I wanted, I felt empowered to power through! (Had it not been there, I might've just powered off the Switch.) After a few terrible defeats in the first hour of my playtime, I turned on Kril's invincibility and allowed myself to learn the rhythms of the combat without consequence for a while. Then, when I felt like I'd started to understand it, I began to slowly dial the difficulty back up. I'd recommend all newcomers do the same thing!

Soulslike veterans, of course, may have no trouble. I checked out another review written by a veteran of games like Bloodborne and he had the totally opposite view of the difficulty here, saying the game felt too easy! So it all depends on your level of experience going in, I suppose.

It's worth working out a balance of challenge that works for you, because the game's environments are all worth exploring and its story is worth seeing through to the end. It begins with Kril, a humble beach-dwelling hermit crab, having his shell repossessed by a loan shark. He's forced to dive into the open ocean and set out on a quest to reclaim it – and ends up embroiled in all kinds of drama beneath the sea.

Pollution is corrupting the denizens of the deep. Trash is floating around everywhere. Microplastics are so prevelant and pervasive that they actually serve as the currency of the game! You can cash them in for upgrades to your stats after you collect enough of them.

I invested heavily in boosting Kril's Attack stat (since I was already fully unkillable thanks to the option menu, and so didn't need any defense boost). Being able to take out enemies in fewer swipes of your fork is helpful – combat can kind of drag on for a long while if your weapon's too weak.

The battles are ultimately satisfying once you get into a groove. Kril, as a crab, can hide inside his shell to block incoming attacks, then pop out to counterattack. He can dodge, parry and even use magic spells eventually – some of which summon forth extra flashy special attacks.

I didn't care for the default controls for combat, but again, the devs give you the option to remap the buttons to whatever's most comfortable for you, so I again took advantage of that option.

The real stars of the show are the shells. With his home shell serving as the kidnapped princess he's searching for, Kril equips dozens of temporary trash shells throughout the adventure. Each of these offers him a different special ability. For instance, if he's wearing a soda can as a shell, he gets access to a magic spell that shoots fizzy bubbles at his foes as a ranged attack. If he wears an old banana peel, he can nibble on it to regain some lost HP. If he inserts himself into a tennis ball, he can then fully roll up in it and barrel down ramps and across the sea floor at frantic speeds!

The shells also serve as collectables – when you pop each new variety onto his back for the first time, it fills in one spot on a collection page. Finding new shell styles and then seeing what they do is fun! My kids' favorite was the discarded top of a ketchup bottle – when Kril wears that one, he can twirl like a top with a breakdancing spin attack.

OK, time for the tech talk. Another Crab's Treasure is not at its best on Nintendo Switch. I mean, that comes as no surprise to anyone, I'm sure – the other, more powerful systems like the PlayStation 5 are able to render its gorgeous underwater environments with much more shimmering detail. The Switch also struggles with loading in new areas – you'll notice that when you hit certain invisible barriers between zones and the game will just stutter and even stop entirely for a few seconds while it catches up.

Moments like those are infrequent, though, and never happen in combat since those areas are always away from enemy spawn points.

What will sometimes trip you up in combat, though, is the imperfect and imprecise camera. I was locked into more than one fight to the death in cramped confines like a tight hallway when the camera got itself stuck on some piece of geometry and couldn't shake itself loose, so I couldn't see what was happening – that's a quick way to get yourself to the Game Over screen. Just try to avoid small spaces like that, I suppose?

On the whole, though, I scuttled away from my time playing Another Crab's Treasure feeling impressed. The accessibility options and thoughtful concern for different players' different skill levels really won me over most of all, and I'm excited to see what this dev team will do next! **– LUCAS**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: AGGRO CRAB
RATING: T

Back to the Basics

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

DISAPPOINTMENT HAS DEFINED the Paper Mario fandom for the better part of the last two decades.

The series got off to a strong start on the N64 with the original Paper Mario – a game that evolved during development from being a more straightforward sequel to Super Mario RPG and into its own thing, with a unique storybook look and paper-thin characters. Nintendo then grew the new brand further by gifting gamers The Thousand-Year Door on the GameCube – a game that deliberately *didn't* evolve into anything too different from its predecessor during its development, and instead was just a straightforward sequel.

But then Nintendo got experimental again.

One of the reasons Nintendo has been able to endure in the video game industry for so long is that their developers are just unmatched in their creativity. They're always coming up with new ideas and different kinds of gameplay – and they've prided themselves on that fact to such a degree that they'll often just let whole franchises sit idle for years if they don't have a good enough, fresh enough new gameplay concept to use to make a new sequel stand apart from its predecessors. (Case in point: F-Zero.) But what's been so frustrating for so long is that, well, we don't always want that!

Sometimes the fans love a game Nintendo has made so much that they do just want more of the same. Give us the straightforward sequels! Give us a similar experience to what we already played before, but with new scenes and new characters and prettier graphics. Slap a "2" on the name of the first game and call it a day!

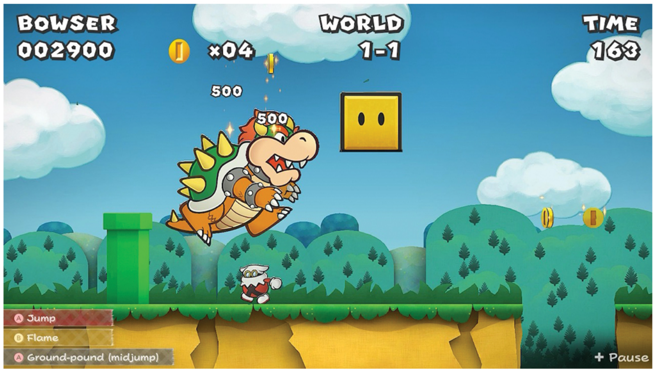
Rarely – extremely rarely – they have actually done that. (I'm still shocked to this day that Super Mario Galaxy 2 was greenlit.) But most of the time they seem to ignore fans' wishes and just do new things regardless.

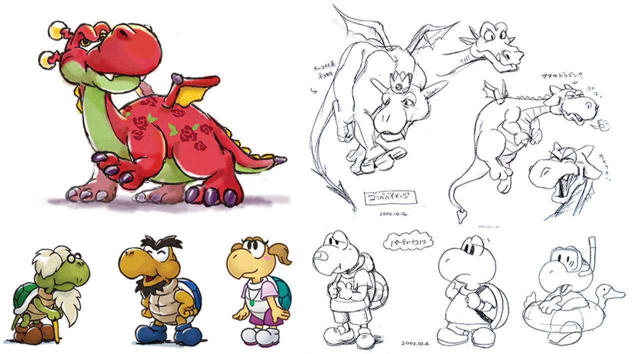
The Paper Mario brand has suffered the most from this obstinate attitude of not just giving us what we ask for.

Rather than follow up on the critically acclaimed Thousand-Year Door with a by-the-numbers Paper Mario 3, they instead spent years spinning off the series in so many different gameplay directions that it made fans' heads spin. Super Paper Mario on the Wii was literally about spinning – moving the camera perspective back and forth between 2D and 3D. Paper Mario: Sticker Star on the 3DS made combat a chore by making every action Mario took be attached to expending limited resources. Color Splash on the Wii U and The Origami King from just a few years ago on the Switch? We put both of them on our magazine cover when they came out, hoping each one would be a return to form for the series – but neither one was. Color Splash had another resource-reliant battle system and Origami King had these weird circular battlefields that would've been interesting as a side mode, maybe, or if they only popped up for a few special battles, but they got boring fast when used in every encounter across the entire quest.

. . . Still tracking with me? That was a long intro, but it's all been to set me up to say that finally, *finally*, the Big N has listened to what fans having been shouting at them to do for decades: They've gone back to the style of Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door – by just directly remaking The Thousand-Year Door! Long-suffering fans who've lived through this brand's entire development saga breathed such a sigh of relief when this remake was revealed that it probably caused an avalanche in the Himalayas.

This is the very same game that those of us who experienced the Cube era firsthand first fell in love with in 2004 – but it's been given a fantastic glow-up, with nearly every single aspect made better than before.





For starters, it's stunning! High definition, widescreen, relit lighting effects in every environment – all the hits of a great visual refresh are here. The game now looks as good on the screen as my memories have always made the GameCube version look in my mind.

The sound has been revamped as well, but with a critical concession for anyone who thinks the new orchestrations might've gone a bit too far: You can buy a Badge to reset the soundtrack back to the 2004 tunes for the price of just one coin. That Badge is joined by a few other new items as well, and there are two brand-new hidden boss battles to find and fight late in the game too.

That's just the right amount of new in a game that otherwise concerns itself with just being the best version of a classic adventure as possible. Quality-of-life additions abound as well, like the new Partner Ring that lets you quickly swap between the tagalong sidekicks who follow Mario, and a new battle tutorial character who pops up regularly to help newcomers learn the ropes of the combat system in a consequence-free environment.

. . . Which brings us to the battles. The blessed, old-school, traditional turn-based battles! A lot of the Paper Mario experience is exploration – wandering around environments, talking to characters, solving simple puzzles and platforming challenges – but the heart of the game is its turn-based combat. It's just *so* nice to finally be playing in this kind of Paper Mario battle system again!

It's so simple: Mario can jump, or he can swing his hammer. Enemies at first are susceptible to both, but then you get flying foes that the hammer can't reach, so you're forced to jump on them. Or you get enemies that have spikes on their heads, so jumping won't work – you've got to hammer those ones instead. It starts off so easy and then every new enemy you encounter adds some new wrinkle, some new obstacle to have to overcome – every battle becomes kind of a puzzle to solve, as you decide which techniques can beat the baddies set before you the fastest, or the most efficiently, without using up too many items or Flower Points.

I think that Nintendo's designers took that "every battle is like solving a puzzle" aspect of this game and just ran with that too far when they came up with the combat scenes of Sticker Star and Color Splash and Origami King. Figuring out the right strategy, and then executing on that strategy, is fun if the experience is balanced right. If your gameplay system is too complex, though, players just won't want to engage with it – they'll shut the game off, go on the Internet and complain that the older games in the series had it right instead!

Well, Nintendo finally listened to that persistent outcry, and so we at last are back on track.

This remake is superb – there's no question you should buy it, and have fun experiencing the new best version of the best Paper Mario adventure. The real question now, though, is what will Nintendo do to follow it up this time? Will they finally give us another traditional Paper Mario: a straightforward sequel? Or will they go experimental again? (Make the right call, Nintendo!)

– LUCAS

10

THIRD OPINION
OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

WAY BACK IN Issue #35, I reviewed the first Octopath Traveler. And while I thought it was gorgeous, had a great story and interestingly unique gameplay, I felt its developers could've done more to unite the characters and make them interact more with each other. Enter the sequel!

Very early on I could tell that every aspect of the original had been improved upon here: The landscapes are even more varied and detailed, the music is fuller and more exciting, the characters have more intriguing narratives, the battle system is more balanced and the voice acting is astounding. This is truly one of the best RPGs I have ever played!

The game has a darker tone, which makes more sense in the endgame (that I won't spoil here), but I was just as invested in these characters as I was in the crew of Final Fantasy VI, which I hold dearly. I chose Therion to start with in the last game, and I chose Throné here. Something about snarky thieves attracts me, but Throné's plight is far more disturbing than I could have imagined. She is an orphan groomed to be an assassin by rulers named "Father" and "Mother" – and forcing them to fight other orphans to see who is the strongest was just the beginning of their "parenting."

Osvald's story is by far the most "adult:" Having been framed by a scholar colleague and sent to prison for the murder of his wife and child, his first chapter has him escaping a sub-zero island prison and remaining a fugitive.

At first glance, Castti's amnesia plot may seem banal, but it adapts into an astonishing story of loss and hope as an apothecary.

Temenos the cleric detective must rout out an evil inside his own church where nobody wants to question the leadership lest they question their own faith, and I adore the doubting and matter-of-fact personality they gave him. Hikari the warrior prince was banished from his homeland because of a coup and he must gather allies to regain his birthright. By contrast, the unflappable Agnea the dancer, witty and charming Partitio the merchant and bubbly Ochette the wildling hunter are bastions of innocence in a depraved world, and a good contrast/palate cleanser between heavier storylines.

It may be just me, but I found I didn't need to do much grinding until the end. By the time you get your eighth character, that person is severely under-leveled in comparison to the rest of the group. Luckily at that point I had EXP-boosting accessories to catch them up quickly, and fighting at night also helped.

In fact, I loved the whole day/night cycle addition, with different abilities and characters showing up at different times. I did a lot of party swapping to avoid the abilities where you could fail (like using Osvald's Scrutize vs. Castti's Inquire). In fact, I ended up having a town party, a battle party and a purchase party just because of all the different abilities and benefits in each scenario.

The final chapter bosses destroyed me in most cases, and that's where I was really forced to consider secondary jobs and what each character meant in battle. I found I was too reliant on one style of play because it had worked so well, but I enjoyed going deeper into the battle system for those final few trials, especially the epic last battle (and hidden final battle).

Yes, I hit 100% completion, which I hadn't done in a game in years! There were many more character interactions, and the quests that had two party members working together were a needed addition that really played into the final chapter and its surprises. Everything felt more deliberate, more interwoven and more impactful. Octopath Traveler II is so brilliantly crafted that it keeps your full attention to the very end – and what an ending it was! **— BRETT**

8.5 REBECCA

9.5 MATTHEW T.

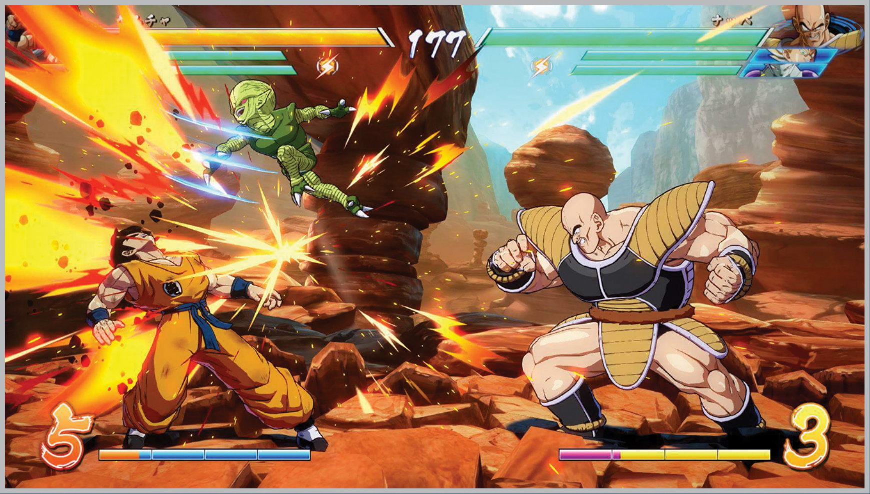
10 BRETT

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Ace Angler: Fishing Spirits	6.5	Rebecca	#63
Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp	9.5	Lucas	#65
AEW: Fight Forever	7.0	David	#67
AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative	8.0	Tony	#62
Another Code: Recollection	8.0	J.-Charles	#70
Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney Trilogy	8.5	Rebecca	#70
Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration	9.5	Kris	#64
Atelier Ryza 3: Alchemist of the End & The Secret Key	9.0	Thor	#67
Baten Kaitos I & II HD Remaster	8.0	Lucas	#68
Bayonetta 3	9.0	Jonathan	#63
Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon	8.0	Jonathan	#65
Bluey: The Videogame	7.0	Lucas	#70
Bugsnax	8.5	Lucas	#61
Capcom Fighting Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#61
ConnecTank	7.5	Lucas	#67
Detective Pikachu Returns	6.0	Lucas	#68
Digimon Survive	8.0	Maggie	#63
Disney Illusion Island	6.5	J.-Charles	#68
DNF Duel	8.0	Sean	#66
Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons	8.0	Kris	#67
Dragon Quest Treasures	8.0	Matthew T.	#64
Everybody 1-2-Switch!	7.5	Kris	#67
Fashion Dreamer	7.0	Rebecca	#69
Fire Emblem Engage	8.5	Rebecca	#64
Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes	8.0	Rebecca	#61
Harvestella	8.0	Nadia	#63
Infinity Strash: Dragon Quest – The Adventure of Dai	5.0	Lucas	#68
JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle R	6.5	Tony	#62
Kirby's Return to Dream Land Deluxe	9.0	Lucas	#65
LIVE A LIVE	8.5	Rebecca	#61
Loop8: Summer of Gods	6.0	Maggie	#66
Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope	9.0	Lucas	#63
Mario Strikers: Battle League	7.5	Lucas	#60
Mario vs. Donkey Kong	7.5	Lucas	#70
Master Detective Archives: Rain Code	7.0	Matthew T.	#67
Mega Man Battle Network Legacy Collection	8.0	David	#65
Metal Gear Solid Master Collection Vol. 1	8.5	Kris	#71
Metroid Prime Remastered	10	Lucas	#64
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 3:		David	#69
Slime Speedway	8.0	David	#63
Octopath Traveler II	8.5	Rebecca	#65
Otogi Katsugeki Mameda no Bakeru: Oracle Saitorou no Sainan!!	9.0	Lucas	#71
Pac-Man Museum+	8.5	Kris	#60
Pac-Man World Re-Pac	7.5	Lucas	#62
Persona 3 Portable	9.0	Maggie	#70
Persona 5 Tactica	9.0	Lucas	#71
Pikmin 4	10	Lucas	#67
Pocky & Rocky Reshrined	8.5	Lucas	#69
Pokémon Scarlet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Pokémon Violet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown	9.0	Derrick	#70
Princess Peach: Showtime!	7.5	Kris	#71
Puzzle Bobble Everybubble!	8.0	Jonathan	#67
Rain on Your Parade	8.0	Lucas	#65
Record of Lodoss War: Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth	8.0	Jonathan	#60
Rune Factory 3 Special	7.5	Rebecca	#68
Samba de Amigo: Party Central	7.0	J.-Charles	#69
Sea of Stars	9.5	Kris	#68
Shiren the Wanderer: The Mystery Dungeon of Serpentcoil Island	8.5	Lucas	#71
Shiren the Wanderer: The Tower of Fortune and the Dice of Fate	8.5	Lucas	#69
Silent Hope	8.0	Brett	#69
Sonic Frontiers	7.0	Tony	#64
Sonic Origins Plus	8.0	Tony	#67
Sonic Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#69
Splatoon 3	9.0	Lucas	#62
Star Ocean: The Second Story R	7.0	Maggie	#69
Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life	7.0	Rebecca	#67
Super Bomberman R 2	8.0	Lucas	#71
Super Mario Bros. Wonder	9.0	Lucas	#69
Super Mario RPG	9.5	Lucas	#69
Tactics Ogre: Reborn	8.5	Lucas	#71
Taiko no Tatsujin: Rhythm Festival	8.0	J.-Charles	#63
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge	10	Lucas	#60
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection	9.0	David	#62
The Legend of Heroes: Trails from Zero	9.0	Maggie	#62
The Legend of Heroes: Trails into Reverie	10	Maggie	#67
The Legend of Heroes: Trails to Azure	10	Maggie	#65
The Legend of Nayuta: Boundless Trails	8.0	Maggie	#68
The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom	10	Lucas	#66
Theatrhythm Final Bar Line	9.0	J.-Charles	#65
Unicorn Overlord	9.0	J.-Charles	#71
WarioWare: Move It!	8.0	Rebecca	#69
We Love Katamari REROLL + Royal Reverie	9.5	Jonathan	#66
Wunderling DX	8.0	Lucas	#64
Xenoblade Chronicles 3	10	Maggie	#62



REVIEW REMINDER
DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ

PUTTING TOGETHER THIS NF issue dedicated to the life of Akira Toriyama reminded me of the excellence of Arc System Works' Dragon Ball FighterZ, which so brilliantly captured his style of art and infused it with such an insane amount of kinetic energy. I thought I should probably flip back through our back catalog and look back over the review Tony wrote when it was first released . . . and my jaw nearly hit the floor. This game first came out in 2018? *Over six years ago already!?* How is that even possible! It feels like it was just yesterday. I must've fallen into the Hyperbolic Time Chamber for a while or something.

Well, regardless of the fact that this game is apparently already aged, it's still a brilliant selection if you too have found yourself wanting to reconnect with Toriyama's work. Tony said it was "masterfully executed" and that "it deserves to serve as the template for all future Dragon Ball fighting games." Well, it hasn't yet, since titles like Sparking! Zero have adopted a different style of gameplay. But hopefully we'll get FighterZ 2 someday! **— LUCAS**

COMMUNITY

- @theaaronschmit, @airyucat, @Ch0nky_, @BATTLE_ATHLETE, @ZabluDoki, @AngryangryD, @PitCloverDraws, @stimmo3, @j_raido, @bunnycartoon, @MarKellZC, @fritzwilliedraw, @clappingdonuts, @fiodoodles, @Duran_Frodo, @DaveTheAOD386, @saltiestbunny, @Videajames, @IllusionOfMana, @TheRyanarchy, @SimplySubarashi, @redapplefries, @YungKhan, @tedbob84, @0tacat, @Garacow, @wiz_kaleb, @blindeduif

CREATIVE FANS PAY THEIR RESPECTS

Artists' Honoring Homages

Social media has once again become a place for fans to process the loss of another legend.

IN HIS HEART, Akira Toriyama always remained an artist. His creations spread across all forms of media over the decades, but I have no doubt that even in his final days, he was still most himself when sitting down in front of a blank piece of paper and just letting the ideas begin to flow. And so it is of course appropriate that the artists of the world who adored him would honor him after his death by creating more art.

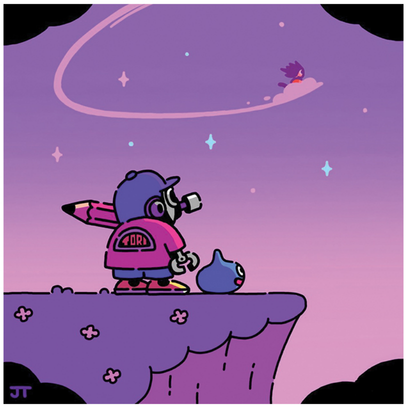
As with the artwork we gathered in print years ago following Mr. Iwata's passing, the pieces seen here are but the smallest handful of the hundreds of works that flooded social media after the news broke of the loss of Toriyama-san last March. But, unlike back then, artwork – and the process of its creation – has changed quite a bit since 2015. Tools like A.I. art-generating software have become incredibly prevelant, and it's become difficult to discern which images were made by human hands and which were simply rendered by a computer brain trained in the techniques used by actual artists to make actual art.

I don't want to go fully off on that tangent – and I think anyone who used A.I. software simply as a way to help process their grief and still honor Akira Toriyama's memory genuinely can get a pass. But I bring up that hot topic here just to lament his loss a little more, as the era of truly talented artists – those who grew up in a pre-Internet age and were trained for the most part by their own diligence and unstoppable work ethics – seems like it's sadly slipping into the past. Will there ever be another master of manga, on Toriyama's level? Will the artists of tomorrow, who haven't even been born yet, be able to develop such a level of skill as his while living in such a vastly different world?

Well, to answer my own dire question with some hope and light: yes. Yes, I believe they will.

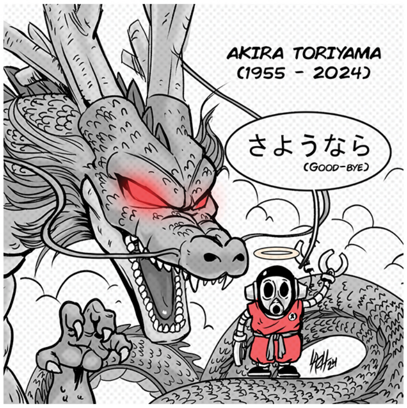
Because while I have been discouraged by the amount of artificial images that've been mixed in with the Toriyama tributes posted online through the last few months, I've been outweighingly encouraged by the truly impressive collaborations that have been created. Videos, songs and multi-artist images like the banner printed above, which was made by 28 different creators all working together, point promisingly to one true, new strength of living and making art "in the future:" Community! Connection. Instantly being able to log on and share your work with thousands and millions, and being able to connect with other, like-minded artists who share the same passions.

Akira Toriyama helped to build those bonds – by creating such beloved worlds and characters that fans all around the world can appreciate them as a kind of common language. Everyone knows Goku! Everyone was impacted by Toriyama-san. **– LUCAS**



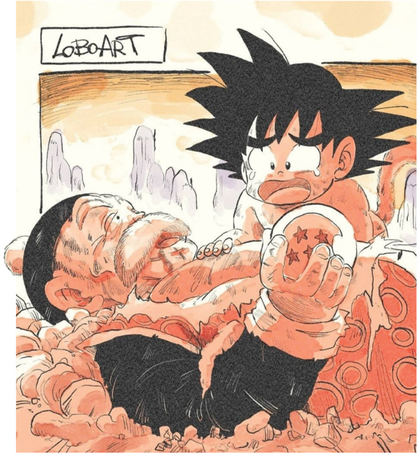
- JAMES TURNER

- GYGY DE LA LUNA



- LARHILUSTRADOR

- JIM LEE



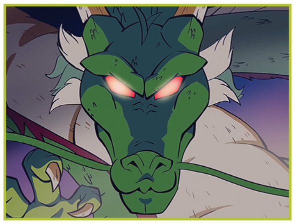
- LOBO ART

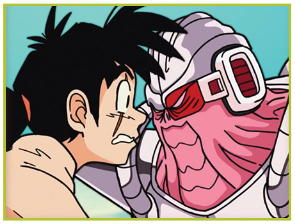
- PSYKHOPHEAR

- YAIRSASSONART

- SELFI3D

- HERI SHINATO





ANIMATION JAM

Reanimating "Rock the Dragon"

A total of 20 artists redrew Dragon Ball Z's classic intro — including David Liu!

HAVE YOU EVER watched a reanimation collaboration? It's a kind of video that's been popping up on YouTube more and more often in recent years, in which teams of animators join forces to redraw some classic piece of a cartoon, or other, similar source material. Painstakingly these artists go frame by frame to reanimate every split-second of the old action, and the whole video is only ever completed because so many creative minds are working together that the individual load that any one has to shoulder is relatively light.

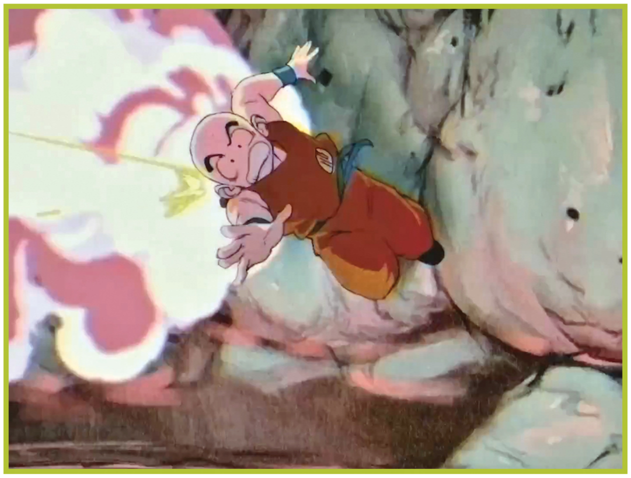
The most recent eye-catching reanimated collab to hit the 'Tube is a remake of "Rock the Dragon," an iconic intro sequence from the Western dub of Dragon Ball Z that was prolific in the '90s. You may have seen it mentioned briefly back on Page 56 — because our Interview subject for this issue, David Liu, was one of the artists who took part!

David's scene starred Krillin (my favorite fighter from DBZ, you know). He's frantically running away from an incoming enemy attack, with explosions trailing his path, hot on his heels! One frame from the scene is printed below: the original on the left, and David's reinterpretation on the right.

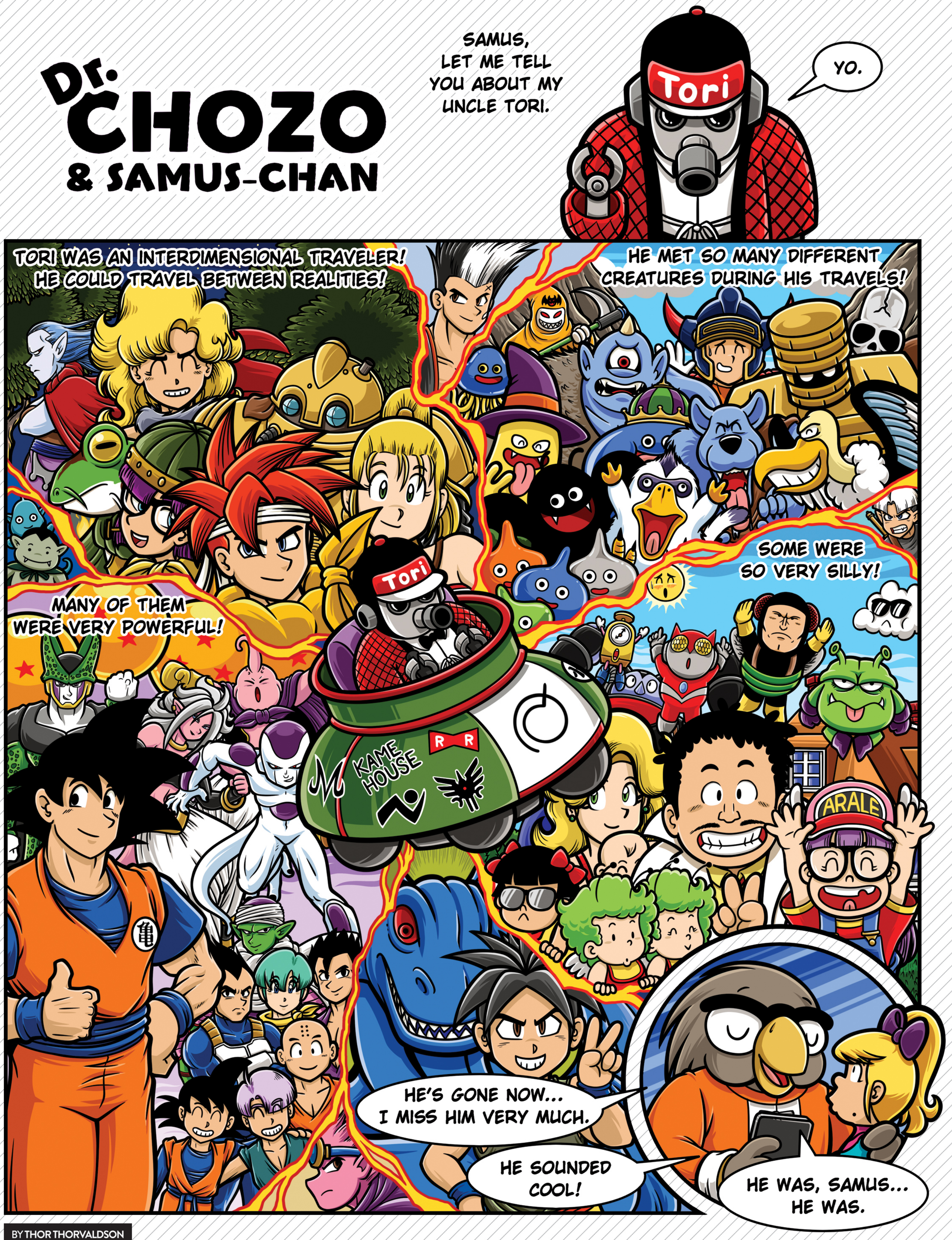
Some artists try to stick to the source material as faithfully as possible in these kinds of collabs . . . others just dive straight into full meme territory and try to make their snippet of footage as funny as possible. Others alter their scenes' focus, like the close-up face-off between Yamcha and Cacao seen just above, which wasn't in the original!

Plenty of video games have served as subject matter for past collabs too — I'd encourage you to seek out and watch The Mama Luigi Project, Zelda CD-i Reanimated and Rhythm Heaven Reanimated, which included a contribution from NF's own comic artist John-Charles Holmes! **— LUCAS**

YouTube.com/SmallButera

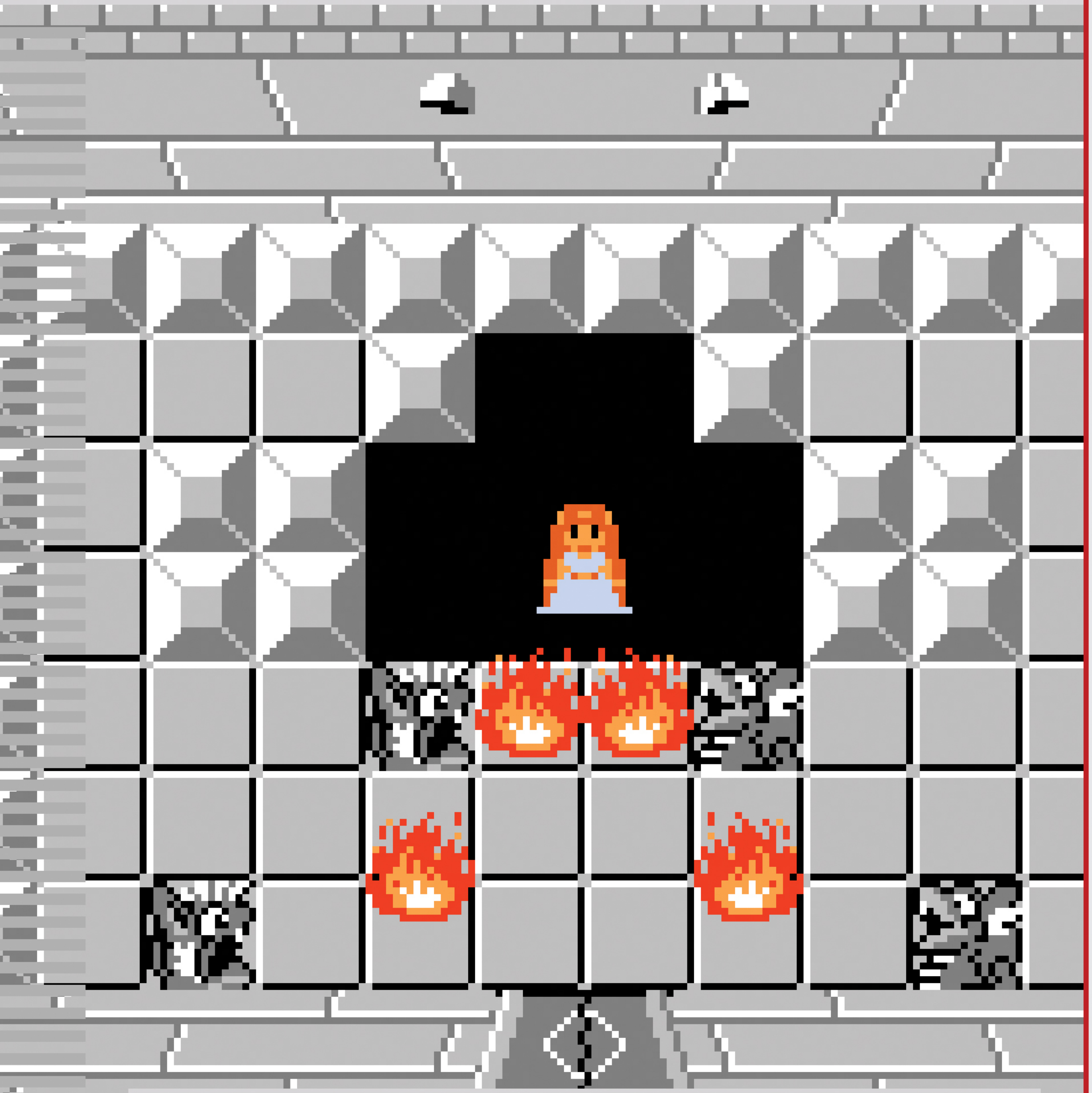


Dr. CHOZO & SAMUS-CHAN



BY THOR THORVALDSON

NEXT ISSUE



Zelda has been waiting.

At first, she was waiting to be rescued. Sitting bored. Idle. Twiddling her thumbs as she lingered alone and just kept hoping that Link would throw open the door to her chamber and save her at any moment.

Then, after a few decades of that kind of treatment, she began to wait for something else: an opportunity to step into the spotlight instead! The chance to become a hero for Hyrule herself, rather than letting Link always soak up all the limelight.

Well, that wait will finally be over in September! Don't miss NF Issue #73 as we celebrate the arrival of **The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom**, and look back on the incredible patience it took for Princess Zelda to get to this point!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #73:

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ECHOES OF WISDOM

METROID PRIME 4: BEYOND

MARIO & LUIGI: BROTHERSHIP

LUIGI'S MANSION 2 HD

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS HD

SUPER MARIO PARTY JAMBOREE

RETRO GAME CHALLENGE: 1+2 REPLAY

YARS RISING

CLOCK TOWER: REWIND

NINTENDO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS: NES EDITION

ACE ATTORNEY INVESTIGATIONS COLLECTION

MARVEL VS. CAPCOM FIGHTING COLLECTION: ARCADE CLASSICS

METAL SLUG ATTACK RELOADED

AND MUCH **MORE!**

SEPTEMBER/ OCTOBER 2024

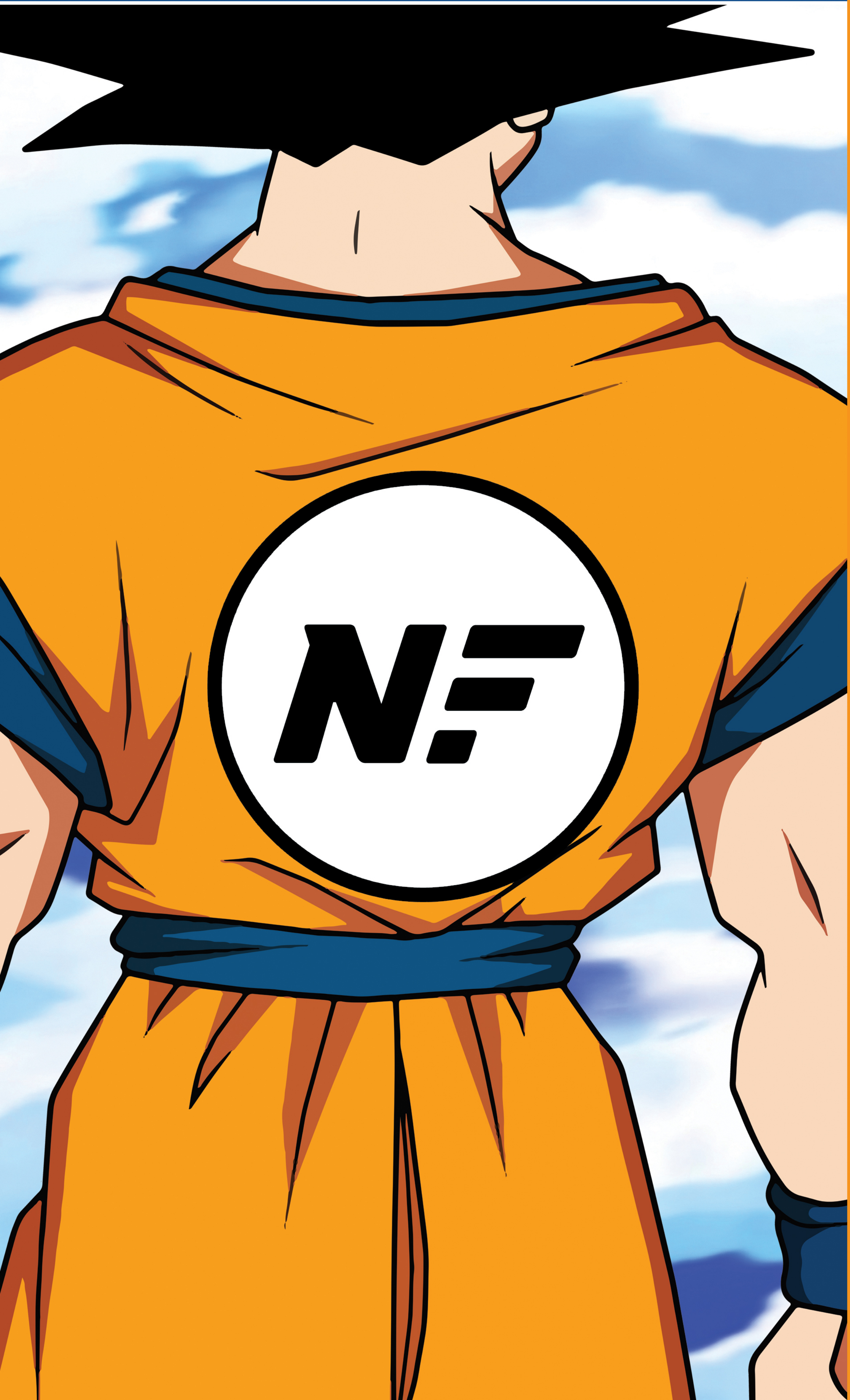
DBZ ON A CRT

I FIRST BECAME a Toriyama fan through a 13-inch screen.

I moved away from my hometown to go to college in the Fall of 1999. My dorm room was sparse: a couple of beds, two stiff chairs and the tiniest TV I'd ever owned. But, despite its size, I still sat in rapt attention and stared at that old screen on a near-daily basis — because, in the Fall of 1999, Dragon Ball Z was being broadcast on Toonami.

I hadn't ever seen it back at home. It was a brand-new spectacle of sight and sound to me, linked forever in my memory with my formative days as a college freshman. It's funny how playing certain games, hearing certain songs or seeing certain shows can just instantly take you back in time in your mind. I'll always recall how I took my first steps into independence and adulthood while watching the earliest DBZ episodes, where Goku too was just finding his footing as a grown-up.

I don't have a photo to share of my own actual old CRT TV set (it was almost exactly 25 years ago now!), but here's a good representation of what my setup looked like. *(Photo by Jordan Starkweather, @jackal27.)* What a way to watch it was! **— LUCAS**



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